


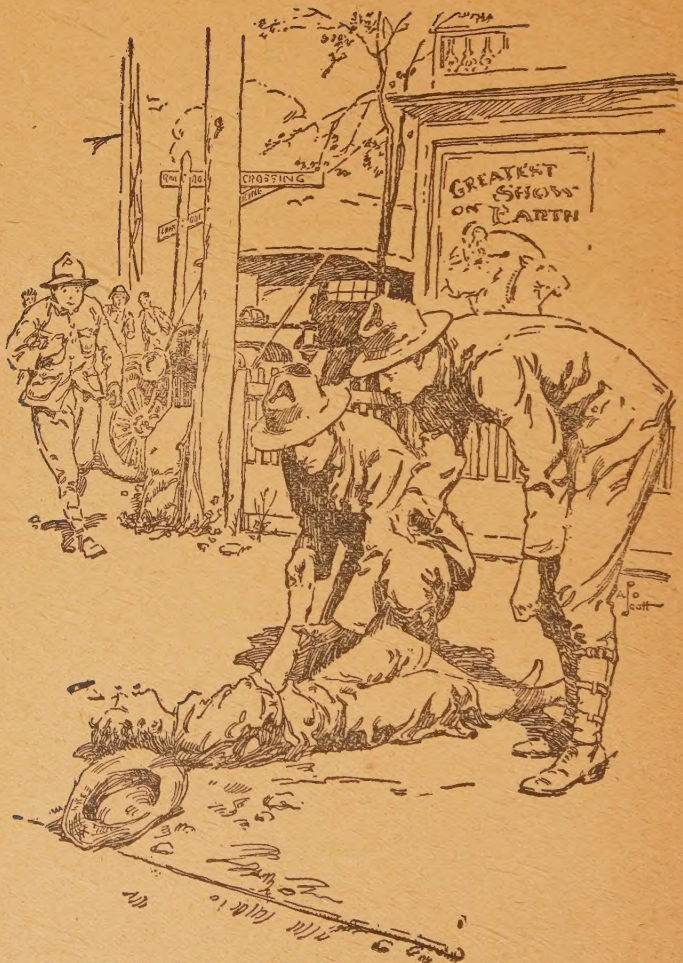


The
BOY-SCOUTS
BADGE *of*
COURAGE
LIEUT. HOWARD PAYSON



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The patrol leader was hastily examining the little fellow's
arm —Page 18

THE BOY SCOUTS' BADGE OF COURAGE

BY
LIEUT. HOWARD PAYSON

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTORCYCLE SERIES," "THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE
EAGLE PATROL," "THE BOY SCOUTS AND THE ARMY AIRSHIP,"
"THE BOY SCOUTS WITH THE ALLIES IN FRANCE,"
"THE BOY SCOUTS ON BELGIAN BATTLE-
FIELDS," "THE BOY SCOUTS' CAM-
PAIGN FOR PREPAREDNESS,"
ETC., ETC.

With Illustrations by
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NEW YORK
HURST & COMPANY, INC.
PUBLISHERS

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The Boy Scouts' Badge of Courage

CHAPTER I

FOUR CHUMS IN KHAKI

"WE'RE nearly there, fellows!"

"Glad to know it, Sim. For one, I'm tired of this stuffy railroad car."

"That isn't all our trouble by a long shot, Andy Bowles. You must remember that two shavings of railway lunch-counter sandwiches don't go *very* far toward satisfying a growing boy's appetite."

"I thought we would soon hear that cry for help from Tubby. His mind seems to run along the eating groove most of the time. A *growing* boy, eh? If he keeps on expanding much more, he'll be as big as a hogshead, I reckon."

"Oh! well, one consolation is you'll all have to

quit calling me Tubby, then. Say, we must be getting somewhere near that town of Wyoming,—how about it, Rob?"

There were four of them occupying seats that faced each other,—all wearing the well-known khaki suits that mark scouts pretty much the whole world over these modern days.

The very stout chap with the freckled, good-natured face was Tubby Hopkins. Sim Jeffords was of rather lean build, with a shrewd look in his keen eyes; Andy Bowles was the one whose cheeks every now and then expanded as though in imagination he might be practicing some new bugle call, for Andy had long been recognized as the official "reveille" and "taps" manipulator of the troop; and last, but far from least, was Rob Blake, the determined leader of the Eagle Patrol, who sometimes acted also as assistant master to the Hampton Troop.

These four comrades, tried and true, came from Long Island, and they had been riding for some hours on a train heading up into the interior of New York State. Part of the Eagle Patrol had passed through rather remarkable adven-

tures in various parts of our own country and abroad as well. Those who are making their acquaintance for the first time in these pages, and who would like to know more concerning their aims and ambitions, as well as some of the stirring things that came their way, are advised to secure recent volumes of this series, where they will find tales of many lively happenings well calculated to please them.

Lately, the boys of the Eagle Patrol had been concerned in the question of national preparedness, and in their role of scouts proved considerable help to Government officials who were wrestling with a number of serious problems.

The vacation season was wearing on after their return home from New Jersey, and things around Hampton had begun to assume their habitual mid-summer stagnation when Sim Jeffords broached an idea to the patrol leader that rather fascinated Rob.

It seemed that Sim had a Cousin Ralph who lived up in the State not far from the heart of the famous Adirondack region, where his father owned a large farm of hundreds of acres a few

miles from the bustling manufacturing town of—well, let us call it Wyoming, because for certain reasons it might not be wholly advisable to locate it positively.

This cousin appeared to have a “grouch,” as Slim called it, concerning the subject of Boy Scouts. He believed they were an overrated lot of boys who somehow managed to advertise themselves in the newspapers, but who, after all, could not begin to “hold a candle” to some outside fellows of practical experience.

Some of the correspondence between the cousins when shown to Rob amused him; and at the same time he could not help feeling just a little annoyed at the “jabs” which the said Ralph continued to give the movement.

More than once he had said he would like to know the Adirondack boy, because he believed he could manage to convert him and influence him to join a scout troop.

The more Rob heard about several activities on the part of Ralph Jeffords, the greater his interest grew. If the farm boy could show such surprising aptitude in Nature study and so wide

a knowledge of the habits of wild animals as his interesting letters indicated, Rob felt sure he would make a most valuable addition to the ranks of the khaki-clad scouts.

Hence, when Sim came and read how his cousin had actually invited him to fetch several of his chums along up to the farm and see what a fellow who made no pretense to publicity could accomplish in several lines of outdoor work, Rob "fell" for the scheme instantly. This expedition was the result of his growing desire to meet Ralph Jeffords on his own heath and convince him that scouts were not at all overrated, as he seemed to believe.

With this short but necessary digression, we can go back again to the four boys whose lively talk will doubtless explain many other things connected with their enterprise.

"Well," Rob Blake observed in answer to Tubby's question, "according to this railroad folder which I got hold of before leaving New York City, we are right now at a little way-station called Jupiter, and I figure that Wyoming lies just seven miles further along the line. At

the rate we are going we should be there in ten or twelve minutes."

"It ought to be a paying trip for us, I should say," observed Andy, thoughtfully. "First of all there's that stump-blowing business by the use of dynamite, which I've always wanted to see done. Ralph says they have cleared many acres in that way; and, besides, his father, being an advanced scientific farmer, is meaning to make use of dynamite to break up the soil. They say pulverizing it many feet down has resulted in wonderful crops of grain and garden sass."

"For my part," added Sim, "and I think I speak for Rob, I'm interested in what my cousin has been doing with his fur farm. You know, his father fenced in a hundred acres of his wildest land, and for a year or two now Ralph has been experimenting in raising black foxes for the market. He hasn't told me a great deal about it, but what little I know has excited me a heap."

"Then he's actually succeeded in raising litters of pups, has he?" asked Tubby.

"I understand he has succeeded more than fairly well," answered Slim, proudly, for it was

his own cousin of whom they were speaking, bearing the family name of Jeffords, too, which counted for a lot with a boy. "Lately he's branched out some, and I believe he's not only started a skunk farm in a fenced-in corner of his 'preserves,' but is going to try raising mink and otter, something that has really never been done before."

"My stars! but that cousin of yours is ambitious!" gasped Tubby, though, not much given to energetic movements himself, could at least admire any one who showed a disposition that way. "The only thing I ever thought I'd like to raise in that fashion was frogs, because frogs, you know, have dandy shanks that taste just like spring chicken. I never could get enough of 'em when we camped out."

"Oh! maybe you will up at my cousin's place," said Sim, indifferently, "for he used to have a pond just *swarming* with husky bull-frogs as big as your hat. You'll have a jolly old time knocking 'em over and fixing 'em for all of us, Tubby."

"I agree to handle the job, and would like nothing better," snapped the stout boy, his face one

broad grin of expectancy, as though an ambition he had cherished for many a moon was in a fair way of being realized at last; they could also see Tubby work his jaws as though his mouth fairly watered at the anticipation of the feasts in store.

A short time afterward the train was drawing close to Wyoming. Clouds of smoke told that there was considerable manufacturing done; and when finally they found themselves going into the station, Rob made up his mind that the mountain town was a pretty lively place. He wondered how it ever came that it had never had a scout troop started; and began to suspect there must be something of the feeling Ralph Jeffords had voiced impregnating the entire community.

To himself Rob was saying that it certainly looked as though these benighted people needed some sort of practical demonstration of the value to any community an efficient scout troop was always bound to be. He secretly hoped that before he and his comrades of the Eagle Patrol left that region an opportunity might arise whereby they could give these folks an object lesson calculated to bear fruit an hundred fold.

Nevertheless, little did Rob Blake suspect just then what a wonderful chance to prove their worth was destined to be offered to himself and three chums; but in good time all that will be set before the reader.

"There's Ralph!" suddenly ejaculated Sim, as with their luggage in hand they prepared to leave the car platform, for the train had now stopped at the station.

A sturdily built young chap, whom Rob instantly liked at first sight, advanced toward them. If Ralph was a farmer's son, he did not look very countrified; but, then, the fact of his father being well-to-do had enabled the boy to attend high school, and secure all the advantages that go with an education.

Sim grasped him by the hand, though immediately wincing under the pressure Ralph unconsciously put into his warm welcoming grip. In turn Sim introduced each of his three chums, who were also given a sample of country cordiality, Tubby rubbing his fat hand for several minutes afterwards.

"I've got the old one-horse shay handy here

to carry you all up in, and your duffle ditto," laughed Ralph, pointing to a rambling car that looked capable of holding half a dozen passengers, and a quantity of stuff besides. "She isn't to be wholly relied on for stability, because she rocks like a ship in a storm; but that engine is all right, for I look after it myself."

So Rob understood that besides his many other good qualities Ralph Jeffords must be something of a mechanic, which added to his interest in the tall country lad. He made up his mind on the spot that he was going to like Ralph; and more than ever determined he would win him around to have a much higher opinion of scouts in general, and those of the Eagle Patrol in particular, before he left Wyoming for Long Island again.

They had managed to stow away their suitcases and overcoats, as well as what fishing tackle they had thought to fetch along in hopes of having some sport while up there in the mountains, when something came to pass that for the moment made them forget all their various plans.

Tubby was just settling down in a corner of the rear seat, and trying to get his feet clear of

the traps that littered the bottom, when he suddenly threw out one of his hands and pointed excitedly, as he cried shrilly:

“Oh! look, boys, look there at that horse acting crazy! One of the cinders from the engine must have fallen on his back and burned him. There, he’s broke loose and is coming this way like a house afire! Somebody get hold of the reins and stop him!”

CHAPTER II

"FIRST AID" AROUSES RALPH'S CURIOSITY

IT chanced that Ralph was the only one not already in the car, for he had stepped around to give the crank a toss, and turn over the engine for making a start.

As a rule Rob Blake was very quick in his movements, but by the time he had succeeded in getting his feet free from the various impediments not yet properly stowed away, and jumped to the ground, the lively country boy had actually sprung forward, seized the horse's bridle, and by throwing his whole weight on the lines dragged him to a standstill.

It was splendidly done, and Rob felt that had Ralph only been a wearer of the khaki he would, because of that act, have been a candidate for a medal such as is given to scouts for saving human life.

The boy who was in the vehicle had unfortunately stood up the better to pull at the reins, as he shrieked to the runaway animal to stop; when the sudden halt came he therefore lost his footing, and took a severe header, landing on one shoulder, with his arm under him.

Rob shivered as he heard the crash, for he felt certain the poor chap would suffer some serious injury. Since Ralph seemed capable of mastering the excited horse, Rob turned toward the writhing boy on the ground.

"Give Ralph a hand, Andy!" he called out energetically, accustomed to handling sudden emergencies, and never for an instant losing his head. "You come with me, Sim. This boy has been badly hurt, I'm afraid."

The little fellow was groaning terribly as they reached his side, and trying unsuccessfully to move himself.

"Oh! it's broken! it's broken! What will daddy say?" he kept moaning.

Sim saw that his face was ashen white, showing that he must be suffering great anguish. Rob immediately but gently turned him over. His

right arm sagged in a suspicious manner and told the story.

"Is it as bad as that, Rob?" asked Sim, in genuine pity for the poor fellow.

Already the patrol leader was hastily examining, but it did not take him long to understand what had happened.

"Yes, he's fractured both bones in the lower arm; but in a fairly decent place between the elbow and wrist. Some one must run for a doctor in a hurry."

"I'll go," said Ralph who had by now joined them, leaving Andy to fasten the still quivering horse to a hitching post; "because I know just where to find Doc Slimmons. Besides, I can get there quicker by using the car."

He jumped over and quickly had the engine humming like mad. Meanwhile, Tubby had managed to land, and when the car shot away Ralph was the only occupant.

Luckily enough, he actually met the doctor in his own little touring car, so that he was back again before five minutes had passed. By that time quite a crowd had gathered. Sim and Andy

and Tubby were employed in forcing the people to keep back, and this they did all the better because they had long been accustomed to handling excited crowds consumed either by a morbid curiosity, or by fear as in the case of a panic.

Doctor Slimmons asked a few questions. He seemed to be impressed with the fact that Rob had known just how to act.

"You say that his left shoulder was also out of place, and that you pulled the bone into the socket again, my boy? Good for you. That was the wisest thing to be done under the circumstances. I believe now that if there was no doctor within reach you would have known just how to go about handling this broken arm. You see, I happen to be acquainted with some of the doings of you scouts, because I served as scout master to a troop in Albany before coming up here to take a practice."

"We have done such things before, Doctor," said Rob, modestly, "and with a fair measure of success. This poor boy is suffering terribly, and I hope you get him home soon."

"Would you like to use my car for the job, Doctor?" asked Ralph, who had listened to what was said with a question in his eyes, though he knew that was no time to ask what was in his mind.

"No, if you will assist me in getting him in my car, I can manage very well; thank you just the same, Ralph. So you stopped the runaway horse, did you; well, it was just what I would have expected from you. Let me say it would give me a great deal of satisfaction personally if khaki suits were more commonly seen on the streets of Wyoming, where there seems to be a queer feeling against the movement. There, lift gently, boys; now hold him until I can get in and fix him comfortably. I've given him something to keep him from fainting, and to deaden the pain as well. Before a great while I'll have the arm set in plaster. Thank you all for your assistance," and with that he started off, not with a rush, but in a way calculated to save his young patient as much shock as possible.

"Well, that was a sudden affair, all told," remarked Tubby, who had been greatly exercised

because of the white face of the injured boy, since he could understand what agony of mind and body the victim must be suffering. "Shall we leave the horse and vehicle here, Ralph?"

"Oh! sure," the other replied; "the boy's father will come and claim his property. I only hope he doesn't blame the kid, because it really wasn't his fault. I reckon a red-hot cinder must have fallen on his back, and stuck there. What was that I heard the Doctor say about you setting the cub's left arm that had been dislocated—was that a fact?"

"Oh! yes, but that was a simple job," remarked Rob, smiling at the decided interest the other seemed to show in the incident.

"We've got a heap more important things to our credit than that, let me tell you, Ralph," Sim hastened to boast, when he saw the scout leader shaking his head at him, as though to beg him not to "blow his own horn," but to leave the other find out these interesting things for himself.

"Well, suppose we try for a start again," suggested the chauffeur; "get settled in your places, boys, while I give the crank a turn."

"I wonder," whispered Tubby to Rob, who chanced to sit next him, with Andy filling the back seat, and Sim in front alongside the driver, "I wonder if he begins to think scouts *can* be worth a pinch of salt, after all, Rob? You know that was one thing he wrote in a letter?"

"Keep quiet," advised the other, also in a whisper, "and perhaps a chance will crop up to show him the value of scout education. I've got a hunch we're due to open some people's eyes up here. I hope it turns out that way. Even that young doctor said they were a narrow-minded lot, you remember, who had a queer antipathy against scouts and their doings."

"Huh! given half a chance and we'll soon show 'em," grunted Tubby, belligerently; and when the fat boy screwed up his features into what he was pleased to term his "fighting face" he certainly did look awe-inspiring, indeed.

They were soon on their way, passing out of the town, and striking a fair road that took them into the country. Ralph, as they went along, pointed out a number of interesting features connected with the landscape, chief of which was

the high peak in the distance that he called Thundertop.

"They still get bear up in that country," he remarked, with kindling eyes that told of the sportsman spirit possessing him, "and deer are often seen. Fact is, at this season of the year they seem tame, and do heaps of damage to some of our crops. But since getting interested in my fur farm I've given up hunting."

"Same way with us," Sim hastened to say; "only now we do our hunting with a camera instead of a gun. I know fellows who used to be just savage to kill game, but who, nowadays, would ten times rather aim to snap off pictures, showing all sorts of wild animals in their native haunts."

"I've heard about that stunt," admitted Ralph, "but never met any one who had done much at it. I hope you've thought to fetch some pictures along with you, Sim; it would sure please me a heap to look them over."

"I'm glad to say I have a pack with me, some of which I captured myself, while other scouts grabbed the rest. I'll take great pleasure in ex-

hibiting the set to you tonight, Cousin Ralph," and the speaker gave Rob a wicked little wink as he partly turned his head, as though to call the attention of the patrol leader to the interest the other was already showing in regard to some of their activities.

Indeed, Rob was growing more deeply in earnest continually with regard to winning the good opinion of this fine fellow, who it seemed had for so long been laboring under such a misapprehension with regard to the value of scout organization.

Later on he learned that a troop had once been started in Wyoming, but, unfortunately, the fellows who tried to play the part were not qualified to serve with credit, nor could they find the right kind of a scout master who would take an interest in his charges. The consequence was that the troop went from bad to worse, and committed such depredations that in the end they had been dismissed from the service, the wise men at Headquarters declining to have the name of the organization brought into disrepute in such a scandalous fashion.

"Our place is only about eight miles out of town," Ralph proceeded to explain, as they continued to glide along at a rapid pace, though the big roomy car certainly did "wobble" furiously, and the lurches occasionally made on bad pieces of the roadway tried Tubby's patience severely, for his breath was knocked out of his body by the "jouncing."

"Oh! I'm glad of that!" Tubby was heard to say. Tubby may have had the supper hour in view when he uttered those words, rather than the rough bouncing he was experiencing.

"You've come in time to see how we knock out some of the stumps in a piece of former woodland," remarked the farm boy. "Dad's doing some of his plowing with dynamite, just to get in practice for the fall, when he expects to turn over ten acres that way for an experiment patch. Yes, and I've got heaps and heaps to show you up at my hatchery and fur farm. I'm already glad you brought your friends along, Sim. I've been hoping to meet some scouts for quite a while; because, you see, I want to find out in what way they're different from other fellows."

"Oh! get that idea out of your head in the start, Ralph" Rob told him, seriously! "Scouts are always boys, just the same, and with a pretty good dose of fun in them, as you'll find. If we do have some ways that are different from the fellows you happen to know around Wyoming, I want you to find them out for yourself, because a scout should never boast of anything he's done."

"Every one of my chums," chimed in Sim, proudly, "was just wild to come along with me when they heard of the stunts you were doing up here. They're interested a heap in fur farming. I've heard Rob here talking about it for two years back. You'll be able to give us lots of valuable pointers, Ralph; not that any of us consider going into the business as possible rivals."

"Shucks! you're welcome to, if you see fit," declared the other, indifferently. "The chances are ten to one against success, unless you've got the right sort of temperament for the job, and, besides, know all about foxes, and mink, and otter, and skunks. Fortunes can be made, and fortunes lost in fur farming. It all depends on

the way you go about it. So far I've been pretty lucky, if I do say it myself. Wait a bit until I can show you my plant, that's all. Here we are, now, at the entrance of the Jefford Farm."

CHAPTER III

THE YOUNG FUR FARMER

"SKUNKS!" repeated Tubby, with a gasp of surprise, "do you really mean to tell me you're raising a colony of those horrible critters around here, Ralph," and at that he commenced to sniff the pure atmosphere most suspiciously, in a manner to make some of the others laugh uproarously.

"Wait and see later on," was all the information Ralph Jeffords would offer, as they turned in through an open gateway, and motored up a winding drive that led to the rambling farmhouse.

The boys were immediately impressed with the air of neatness that seemed to be a leading feature at the Jeffords farm. Evidently, the farmer was not only a man of considerable means, but he also liked to surround himself with con-

veniences such as few dwellers in this Adirondack wilderness could afford to possess. Running water, electricity generated by his own plant, gas made at home, and a dozen other like comforts attested to his good sense.

"You see, my father had to come up here to live long ago," explained Ralph, when he heard the others express their surprise concerning these things so unusual in a district removed from town, "and as he grew to love the place more and more, he kept installing these conveniences, until now we are fairly comfortable."

Tubby felt sure he would like the whole outing first-rate. He even sniffed the air again vigorously, this time because of a delightful aroma of cooking that was borne from the kitchen end of the big farmhouse; for as everybody knew Tubby Hopkins was—well he himself called it a "connoisseur" when it came to the subject of providing for the wants of boyish appetites.

At the door a tall gentleman was waiting to receive them. He, of course, was the father of Ralph, a sunburned man of rugged build, who looked as though he enjoyed the best of health,

thanks to his outdoor life; and yet many years before he had come up to this region expecting to make a last fight against insidious disease.

"Glad to know you all, boys," he told them, shaking hands cordially, while his eyes glistened with pleasure, for it was not often Ralph had friends visit him, he being a rather peculiar boy and much given to keeping his own company.

Supper was soon ready, and although the boys had felt a bit tired after a day on the train, they were speedily revived once they sat down to a table that seemed fairly to *groan* under the weight of good things.

Tubby actually slyly pinched himself once or twice as he looked at the wonderful spread, for he feared he was dreaming. Tubby was already certain he would like the Jeffords farm very much—all but those skunks, and somehow that worried him. He had had a former experience with similar little animals that had given him great trouble, and caused him to be shunned by every boy in camp during the rest of their stay in the woods.

"Huh! once stung, twice shy," was the way

Tubby put it when he allowed his mind to travel back again to those sorrowful days of the past.

Afterwards they gathered in the big living-room, where the conversation became general. Rob had warned his chums not to attempt to boast of anything they had seen or done in their capacity as scouts; but when actually questioned they were at liberty to reply at length.

Thus a number of events came to be mentioned, and it could be seen that both Ralph and his father had their interest aroused. In good time, just as Sim anticipated, the subject of photography was brought forward.

"Oh! yes, Sim!" exclaimed Ralph, suddenly, "you promised to let me take a look at a bunch of pictures you and some of the other fellows took—I think you said they were of wild animals you had met in the woods. Would you mind getting them now, while we have time?"

"I'll be only too glad to do it, Ralph," came the ready reply. "While I'm about it, Rob, I might as well fetch the little package of war scenes you fellows managed to snap off over in Belgium and France when you were there; also of the Pan-

ama-Pacific Exposition at San Francisco."

Ralph looked doubly eager on hearing this.

"Do you mean to tell me, Rob, that you've been across the sea, and actually in the fighting zone where the Germans and the French and British are scrapping to beat the band?" was what he flashed out.

"We had that great good fortune," replied the leader of the Eagle Patrol, modestly; "and saw a lot of things we'll never forget to our dying day. I'll tell you more about them while you're looking over our little collection. They're not the best pictures we've ever taken, because you know we had only a tiny vest pocket edition of a camera, and had to snap most of them off on the sly, for we would have been arrested if caught doing it openly. I see you have a fine reading glass here on the table, and with that you can get a lot of good detail work."

"Well, I begin to see that I'm going to get real enjoyment out of this visit you and your chums are paying me, Sim," acknowledged Ralph, frankly.

When later on the pictures were being exam-

ined in detail, and there was always some story connected with every one, he repeated this expression a dozen times. Sim or one of the others had a lively yarn to tell of many of the animal pictures—how Mr. Coon, for instance, was induced to snap off his own likeness while in the act of stealing a tempting bait, a cord causing the trap to spring, and the flashlight to flame up, considerably astonishing the invader; also little adventures of their own while stumbling along through the darkness to set a snare for some wary old fox that would never come near the camp.

Ralph enjoyed these reminiscences hugely. They were quite in line with his own fads, and more than once he exchanged glances with his father as though to admit that possibly more enjoyment could be had in hunting with a camera than while "toting" a murderous shotgun through the woods in order to kill off the innocent little beasts and birds that dwelt there.

Then, when the war pictures were being shown, how eagerly did he ask dozens of questions, for every boy has it in him to yearn to see

military manœuvres, perhaps a battle royal; though after passing through one such experience his ideas are apt to change radically.

Rob was able to give quite graphic descriptions of numerous thrilling things he and his chums had witnessed, yes, and even participated in. He told these modestly enough, as though it was only a matter of course that scouts should lend a helping hand, and to assist field hospital surgeons take care of desperately wounded men of both sides who were being brought in by streams.

At another time Ralph might have felt considerable doubt regarding the authenticity of these accounts. Somehow, after witnessing the prompt manner in which Rob had taken care of that unlucky boy thrown from the vehicle, and suffering not only a broken arm but a dislocated shoulder as well, it seemed only natural that a wideawake young chap, such as he realized the scout leader to be, should prove equal to even greater emergencies.

Long and earnestly did he scan those small pic-

tures that in many ways revealed the fact that Rob had indeed been in the war zone, close to where terrible battles were being daily fought to prove whether the ideals of the Teuton or those of the Allies were to prevail from that time forth in the world.

Finally, Rob grew tired of talking. He turned the tables by starting Ralph into telling some things connected with his unique enterprise of fur farming. Once this subject came to the front and the farm boy was all animation, for it could be easily seen that his heart was in his peculiar profession.

"I'd always had ideas on the subject," he went on to say, "but only a couple of years ago commenced to put them into practical operation. Dad gave me a hundred of his wildest acres that could never be used for anything else, and we had the tract fenced in, even going down several feet so as to keep my foxes from ever digging a burrow, and escaping in that way."

"Did you catch or buy your first pair of blacks?" asked Rob.

"Well, as there hasn't been a wild black fox

seen around this neighborhood for twenty years and more, though plenty of common red ones," Ralph explained, "we had to invest some big money for the first pair. But they had a litter of pups, and it happened that the little chaps came true to color, all right, though they sometimes revert back to the old stock, you know. So we got started, and by trading, selling, and buying I now have just sixteen foxes in my pen, some young, and others ready to donate their pelts this Fall, if the market quotations hold up."

"About what price do you call a good one?" asked Sim.

"Oh! all the way from five hundred up to fifteen hundred dollars," said Ralph in the most unconcerned way possible; at which Tubby's eyes widened, and he exclaimed:

"Gingersnaps and popguns! but you surely don't mean that amount of money for just one little black fox skin, Ralph?"

"Why, certainly," the other assured him, smiling at Tubby's amazement. "There have been extra fine ones that brought as much as three thousand dollars. I never expect to raise such

expensive stock. I'm counting on five hundred as the basis of my calculations; and if you're fairly successful in raising your litters, there's good money in the business at that. Besides, it's great sport in the bargain to one who really loves animals, and knows more or less of their cute ways."

"Five hundred dollars for just one little skin!" Tubby was heard to mutter, as though that struck him as most remarkable. "Well, if you keep along as you're going, Ralph, I can see you getting to be a second Rockefeller before you're fifty. Now, I don't suppose a skunk is quite as valuable an article, though the fellow brave enough to handle him deserves a fortune, according to my notion."

"Oh!" laughed the other, "we're glad to get from one to three dollars for a skunk pelt, according to whether it's jet black, or striped. Most of them are striped, you know. But wait and you'll learn more about these things later on."

"Then it'll have to be at considerable distance for me, I guess," affirmed Tubby, with a look

of resolution on his broad face, and a determined shake of his head.

Upon being encouraged to narrate some of his interesting experiences while engaged in his odd calling, Ralph gladly complied. The scouts showed deep curiosity as they plied him with questions. Evidently there was a good chance for a fair exchange of notes, and it looked as though both sides would be all the richer for this barter.

It was found that an extra large room had been set aside for the boys, with two generous double beds in it. There were four windows, so they were sure to have an abundance of fresh air while up at the farm.

When retiring for the night, at about ten o'clock, amidst sundry yawns, and more or less stretching of arms, the quartette from Hampton seemed to agree on one particular thing. This was to the effect that their stay in the mountains promised to be one of the most interesting and entertaining of all their experiences. There were so many new things for them to see, and the environments seemed so particularly home-like—

with royal fare thrown in, Tubby wanted them to remember as they gave thanks—that a feast awaited them.

Some of them wished they had come for a month instead of just one week. But the vacation season was nearing an end, and they had certain duties and engagements around Hampton that could not be longer deferred.

So they finally climbed aboard their several big beds, and Tubby tried to get the wonderful things he had been hearing out of his mind, so he could go to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK FOX PEN

A GRAND morning awaited the four boys as they hurriedly dressed, and then stepped outdoors. Ralph was already afoot, as he had a few chores to be attended to at the nearby barns, where the grunting of fat hogs and squealing of smaller pigs, the lowing of fancy cattle that gave the rich cream they had enjoyed the night before at supper, as well as horses, sheep, and even some high-priced goats told how Mr. Jeffords took his country pleasures.

Then there was a series of houses and yards devoted to poultry, mostly of the Rhode Island Red and White Leghorn varieties. Just beyond the boys were delighted to find a pen of beautiful imported pheasants with magnificent plumage of almost every color of the rainbow.

"But try as we would," confessed Ralph, "we've never been very successful in raising

many of those birds. Father thinks they are not suited to the climate, even up here in the mountains, where it never gets as hot as down your way. You see, they flourish best in a country like England, where the winters are mild, and summers fairly decent. So we just keep that stock for show purposes. Father lost money in his investment; but it taught us both a lesson. We go in now for the best native stock of all sorts."

Breakfast even raised the good opinion Tubby already entertained toward the woman who did the cooking. When he found that she was a genuine Southern "mammy," for the Jeffords originally used to be slave-owners down in South Carolina, he could understand how she made such jolly cornbread, and why they had hominy on the table every morning of their stay.

Now they had the first day before them, and there would be much to interest them.

"First thing you want to watch," Ralph went on to say as they still sat around the table, though no one could eat another mouthful of food, "is the way we smash our big stumps up here. It's

always well worth seeing to a novice, though long ago we became so accustomed of harnessing dynamite, and making it do our work for us, that we take things as a matter of course."

"I suppose," said Andy Bowles, reflectively, "it's just like folks who have electricity, and use it for cooking, ironing, making toast, heating water in a hurry, and a thousand-and-one other things; so before long they look on it as a servant in the house, always to be started working by the touch of a button."

Once outside and the boys were led to a distant part of the farm, where the wood lot still remained. Here several men were busily engaged in blasting out stumps of trees that had previously been cut down, and carted away in one shape or other.

The dynamite cartridge was placed properly, being connected by a wire with a battery at some little distance away. Then at a signal the operator made his connection, there would follow a sharp report quite different from a powder explosion or the roar of big guns over on the battle lines in Europe. After that the stump would

be lifted bodily from its lodgings and could be carted away, either whole or, as usually happened, in fragments.

Rob was particularly interested in the operation. He examined everything connected with the simple apparatus, and asked a number of questions concerning the outfit. No one dreamed how valuable the information he thus received was going to prove before a great time had elapsed.

"Of course, if you are doing all these stunts with dynamite, Ralph," he finally remarked, "you must keep quite a stock of the explosive on hand all the time?"

"We have to," he was told, without hesitation. "It is kept locked up in that little stone house we passed coming up here, and father himself doles out the day's supply. The stuff is a little too dangerous, and costly, too, to be left around loose."

"I should say so," admitted Tubby, who had listened to all this talk with interest, though never for a minute dreaming that it would enter into any affair in which they would be connected.

"You see," continued Ralph, always willing to supply information, "we have it so arranged that we can carry several cartridges, as well as the coil of wire and the battery, on this little hand-cart that one man can push. So we can go to any part of the farm. Once we drove twenty miles with the outfit to clear up a tract for a gentleman who had never seen stumps blown to pieces in this way."

Rob thought that was a clever idea. He impressed it upon his mind, though had he been asked why he did this he might have found it difficult to answer, except to say that he always liked to store such interesting facts away for future reference.

"How about that plowing with dynamite?" asked Sim. "Will Uncle Simon be doing any of that today, do you expect, Ralph?"

"I hardly think so," the other replied. "It was laid out for tomorrow, and one gang working along those lines is enough at a time. The next thing on the morning's programme is a visit to my fur farm. Are you feeling fit for a little walk?"

"We're crazy to be on the jump," affirmed Sim. "You must know that scouts hike a great deal, which is one thing that makes for their good health. Even Tubby here is pretty good at tramping, though you wouldn't think it to look at his build. He has plenty of grit, and will stick everlastingly to anything he attempts, even if laboring under a handicap that none of the rest of us have to stand."

Tubby had to bow to Sim after this compliment.

"Oh! I've got plenty of grit," he admitted, "but there are times when I puff and blow terribly. That can't be helped, you know. I'm built on such a generous order that I have to carry a heap more weight than most fellows."

Presently they started forth, chattering like magpies as they walked along. The section of the big farm given over to Ralph's experiment in fur raising was quite some distance from the house, being an angle where the primeval woods covered most of the "soil," which, by the way, happened to be pretty much rock.

On the road they came across a pond where

there were rushes, and plenty of frog-spawn floating on the water. Tubby became interested at once.

"Oh! listen to the bass chorus, will you?" he ejaculated. "Why, there must be a dozen huskies keeping time if there's one. Oh! see that monster on the bank! Say, I can count three more big greenbacks sunning themselves on the mud near the edge of the water. Whew! but it makes my mouth water just to think of the *delicious* messes a fellow can pick up here any old day."

Ralph laughed good-naturedly.

"Then consider yourself appointed official frog hunter for the crowd," he told Tubby, whose eyes glistened at hearing the joyous news. "You can have just as many as you want to eat while up here. Somehow, I don't seem to care much for frogs' legs myself, nor does dad. When we hanker after chicken we get chicken, and if it's fish we want, we go out for trout or bass; but the combination doesn't appeal to us."

"Thank you a dozen times, Ralph, for giving me the promise of a smashing good feast. I'm abnormally fond of them. When you ship a

batch of frogs' legs down to New York markets, how do you go after them? They jump so swift that it's always hard for me to corral any. At home I use a short pole with two feet of line, and a red fly at the end, pushing close enough to dangle the said fly before the nose of Mr. Frog, who grabs it in a hurry."

"Oh! we don't bother with all that fuss up here," explained Ralph. "I have a little Flobert rifle that I knock 'em over with. You could get a hundred in a morning without much trouble. I'll lend it to you any time you want, Tubby."

That completed the delight of the fat boy, who, in imagination, already saw himself feasting on his favorite dish to his heart's content.

"It's going to be lots of fun for Tubby," remarked Andy, quizzically, "but all the same it's bound to be death to the frogs."

"Well, what good are the slippery things, except to serve as food for people, I'd like to know? As singers they're a miserable failure, and all their lives, from the time they're tadpoles up to when they weigh two solid pounds, they never do

any particular good till they are served on the table, browned to a crisp, and making honest boys' hearts send up their thanksgiving."

"No use trying to convince Tubby about the sin of sacrificing things to satisfy his appetite," laughed Rob. "He's committed to the idea that everything was put on this earth for one great purpose, which was to cater to the wants of man."

"Well, isn't getting good and hungry one of man's greatest troubles?" Tubby immediately demanded, triumphantly. "Hasn't he been given dominion over all the fowls of the air, the fishes of the waters, and the animals that populate the woods in order to sustain his life? That's my way of looking at it, so there you are."

As usual, Tubby's argument was unanswerable, and as they left the noisy frog pond in the rear, the fat boy cast a happy glance back at the watery stretch, as though anticipating royal good times around that vicinity later on.

After a while they came to a wilder stretch of country. Rob knew then that the fur farm was close at hand, and presently they caught glimpses

of the high fence surrounding the tract given over to this unique enterprise.

"I wanted to ask if you ever had any of your foxes stolen, Ralph?" Sim was inquiring as they pushed on. "When a single black fox pelt is worth hundreds of dollars, it strikes me that some unscrupulous men might scheme to sneak in on you and try to clean out your farm."

"Well, they couldn't do that, because the foxes are mighty cunning," the proprietor explained. "They would have to set traps, and come and go. I've figured all that out, and taken proper precautions against losing any of my prizes. One of the men stays up here day and night, and I often join him. He has a cabin inside the enclosure; and, besides, we have a way of detecting it if any intruder should try to climb the fence. Electricity is a great agent, you know, Sim."

He did not take the trouble to explain further, so the boys could only guess what he meant. Rob believed that there must be a wire running along the top of the fence, and that every night an electric current was turned on, after the manner in which empty dwelling houses are protected in big

cities by a firm that guarantees against their being entered and robbed during the absence of the owners.

If this were so, it would mean that Ralph was clever, and up-to-date. Rob found himself admiring the other more than ever. He also meant to win Ralph over to a new way of looking at scout activities before they departed from that region. Such a wideawake and enterprising boy certainly should be enrolled in the ranks where his influence would be for the upbuilding of other fellows' character.

In other words, Rob believed that Wyoming was horribly behind the times in not encouraging a regular scout troop; and he hoped that this fault could be remedied before a great while, to the betterment of the community and every growing lad around Wyoming. Because an irresponsible group of fellows had once organized and tried to carry out the ideas of the Boy Scouts without any real authorization from Headquarters was no reason the experiment should not be tried again, this time starting from the right base.

Once inside the enclosure, they found many things to interest them. Tubby expressed himself wild to set eyes on a genuine black fox. He had often seen the common red variety, but something that was especially valuable appealed to his curiosity.

So, to oblige him, Ralph uttered a little call that, after being repeated several times, brought a response. They could see a dark-colored object creeping toward them, but it would not come very close.

"Usually Timmy will come up and eat food out of my hand," said Ralph; "but, like all his breed, he's a timid little duck, and doesn't take to strangers. So that's about all you'll see of him today."

At the first movement one of them made the fox vanished like a streak.

"He's lit out," said Tubby, in a disappointed tone. "I'm sorry, too, because I'd like to say I'd petted a black fox. But, Ralph, between us, he looked sort of silver-colored; you know?"

"Some people call them silver foxes," the grower of fine fur explained. "In some lights

they do look silver gray, and then again dense black. But their fur is the silkiest known, which is one reason it commands such a big price; it isn't coarse like that of other foxes. You know the difference between a common cart animal and a thoroughbred Kentucky race horse; well, and black fox is of that racer breed."

They naturally talked more or less of the chances of such an enterprise succeeding, and Ralph learned that Rob Blake was pretty well posted about all such things.

"We are taking a chance, you understand," he remarked, after Rob had asked several questions, "but we think we are on the way to making the venture a profitable one. Like everything else that deserves success, you have to work like a beaver, and put your whole soul into it, day and night. It's eternal vigilance in raising fur, because we have all sorts of enemies to fight against."

"Enemies?" repeated Tubby. "What do you mean by that, Ralph?"

"Oh! some disease may get into your pen, just as sometimes happens to chicken fanciers,

and cleans them out. Foxes are liable to disease, and also to insect pests that make the fur less valuable. Then eagles and hawks are always ready to pick up a fat young fox if they get a chance, not to speak of raiding wildcats. My man always carried a gun with him when making his rounds."

"And has he often had to use it to protect your fox litters?" asked Tubby.

"We've killed quite a few birds that meant to rob me of the profits of my labor," Ralph answered, "and one wildcat was shot close to this place; but so far as I know up to now I haven't lost a single pelt. We count our animals every day at feeding time. I'll fix it later on so you can see the whole pen at once by staying hidden in a tree while we call them around. Now let's move along, because you will want to see my other pens containing the mink, otter, and skunks."

CHAPTER V

AN UNINVITED VISITOR

"YOU'LL excuse me, boys," observed Tubby, naively, "if I stop to tie my shoe lace. I'll catch up with you right away, or hang on to your wake, which will answer just as well."

Sim chuckled as though amused.

"Bless his heart," he remarked to Ralph, who had not exactly understood, "Tubby has a natural prejudice against skunks. It was honestly earned, too."

Then he rapidly went on to sketch the adventure that had taken place once upon a time when Tubby was green to the woods, telling how the other upon running across a skunk for the first time thought it a "cute" little animal just such as he wanted for a camp pet; and after trying to get it in a corner so as to pounce on it, Tubby wished he hadn't—also how he was banished from ac-

tive participation in the delightful times they had later on simply because the other fellows refused to associate with him.

All this amused Ralph greatly.

"Well, I admit that it's mighty dangerous for any one to bother with skunks, for they are timid animals, and mistrust every one they don't know," he stated. "I move around among them without any trouble. They feed from my hand, and I've taken up several of them just as you would a tabby at home. I admit that eternal vigilance is the price of safety when near them. You must be on the alert continually, and never do anything to startle them."

"Well, a bee man near our town told me bees were handled along the same lines," Andy Bowles added. "Those who handle the frames full of honeycomb, and swarming with bees must be cool chaps. Smoking helps some, for bees seem to think the hive is in danger, and begin to load up with honey right away. It seems that when a bee is carrying all the honey it can stagger under it isn't liable to get busy with its sting."

They now arrived at the part of the big en-

closure given over to the striped animals with the bushy tails and the small heads. Tubby stayed far back, and kept on the anxious seat all the time. No inducement could tempt him to join the others.

"I'm not immune, if you fellows are," he called out, when they tried to coax him along. "I know when I'm well enough off, too, and some people don't seem to understand that fine point. Don't bother with me, boys; go ahead and investigate; but I hope you'll be wise enough to let Ralph do all the handling of his pets. Ugh!"

So they left Tubby there to await their return. Ralph showed them through the skunk preserve, explaining many things connected with the curing of skins so that they would have a marketable value.

"You see, there's getting to be a shorter crop of the best skins every year to meet a growing demand," he proceeded, after the manner of one who had the points at his fingers' ends from constant study. "That means commoner pelts have to take the place of those that are falling off. Many of these are muskrat and skunk skins, and

even the common house tabby is called on to help tide over the shortage. What with a skillful use of dyes, and even the sewing of white hairs in black skins, they manage to deceive the public."

He showed them how he could feed some of his queer pets. Tubby at a distance was holding his hands together, and looking very much distressed when he saw a dozen of the striped animals all around Ralph, and acting like chickens on the farm when grain was being thrown to them.

Later on, when the boys were thinking of turning away and continuing their investigations further, they heard a great outcry from near at hand.

"Hey! Ralph, everybody come quick, and chase this skunk away! He's bent on making up to me, and I can see from the way he looks that he just knows I'm a hater of his species. Oh! please hurry and save me!"

Laughing at the frantic appeal in Tubby's voice, they hastened toward him, to find that the fat boy in desperation had actually climbed a tree, while a very small specimen of the inmates of

the corral was moving about below, now and then looking upward, as if wondering why he was not given something to eat, as usual.

They rescued Tubby by Ralph coaxing the "terrible beast" to move away. Tubby looked red in the face, and also seemed to be a little ashamed at having shown the white feather.

"Well, I admit it was a bad case of rattles with me," he said, with a grimace; "but, then, there's a reason. I've been there before, and I know that the smaller they are the more likely you may be to get them angry. But all's well that ends well. I'm glad you're done with this particular pen. Now show us your mink and otter, won't you, Ralph?"

"I can show you where I keep them, and what I've done to induce them to feel at home and multiply," replied the other, "but I doubt whether we catch sight of a single member of the community. They are that shy they seldom come out in the daytime. As to feeding them, all we have to do is to see that there are plenty of fish in the brook that runs through the lot."

"But if that brook comes and goes, what's to

prevent your high-priced mink and otter from following it out?" inquired Andy, who never liked to puzzle over anything unnecessarily when the answer could be obtained simply by asking.

"Oh! we've fixed that by a regular barred gate at either end," explained Ralph. "The water can escape, ditto very small fish; but we keep larger ones stocked in the stream; and those fur-coated fishers can always get a mess."

"And I suppose," suggested Rob, deeply interested, "that if you ever do think they've increased in number, and you feel like taking your toll of the bunch, you'll have to set regular mink and otter traps in the water to catch them with?"

"That's what it'll amount to," admitted the other, "but understand that I'm not building any great hopes of more than getting my money back on this mink and otter venture. I don't believe any one has, so far, been very successful raising them artificially. Some animals, you know, will not breed in captivity. But I'm making the experiment, and later on will let you know how it turns out."

"Show us how that water gate works, will you,

Ralph?" suggested his cousin, who always liked to examine anything that excited his interest—Tubby had also been that way once, but since a bitter experience he had shown more commendable caution, and was ready to take some things for granted.

"Certainly, if you come this way with me," the fur farmer replied. "Here's the creek, you see, and in some of these little burrows among the rocks and in the earth the mink and otter lie in safety. Right now I warrant you more than one pair of bright eyes watches every move we make, though you couldn't discover the animal if you had a field-glass along."

In this fashion he continued to tell them many interesting things connected with his study of wild animal life; some of which were new even to Rob, who had had an extended acquaintance with such subjects ranging over a long experience. The subject was very fascinating to all of the scouts, even Tubby declaring that he was beginning to take quite some stock in the study of small game animals, "all but one kind that somehow don't seem to appeal to me," he went on to

say, whereupon, of course, Sim had to hastily remark:

"Huh! some of the boys are still of the opinion that they *do* appeal to you pretty strongly, Tubby; but there, let it pass. I just couldn't help saying it, you know."

They saw the tracks of the timid mink and otter along the edge of the stream where they fished for their dinners daily, but did not catch even a fleeting view of a member of the little fur colony.

Coming to the high fence among the trees, they found where the brook passed out. The "gate" mentioned by Ralph was a well-built one, made of stout lumber, and with iron bars close together, between which the water could always pass, but no animal find either an exit or entrance.

"Sometimes, after a storm, we have to clear this grating," Ralph told them, "for it catches and holds all sorts of floating stuff, such as dead wood and the like. So far it seems to answer our purpose. Our last census of the inmates showed that they were all here, and that there was a pair

of whelps with one set of the mink—if that is what you call them, perhaps cubs, eh, Rob?”

“Well, I hardly know how to answer that,” confessed the other. “If I wanted to speak of them, I’d likely say baby mink, or youngsters. It would be a feather in your cap, Ralph, if you did succeed where so many others have fallen down. I’m sure we all wish you the best luck going.”

“That’s right!” declared Tubby, emphatically. “I admire pluck wherever I see it; and somebody has always got to be a pioneer in every movement that succeeds over many failures.”

“You see, the woods are pretty dense over in this section,” explained the fur farmer, “and there’s always danger that some wild beast may slip in here when Pete and myself are away, to make a haul of my property. It would be a hard blow if I came along here some day and found that my mink colony had been cleaned out.”

As though his words had been carried to hostile ears and aroused a storm of protest, at that very moment there came a growl so savage that it made Tubby tremble. He stared straight up

into the tree from which the sound seemed to proceed, pointed a quivering finger, and gasped the one word:

“Wildcat!”

CHAPTER VI

PELEG PINDER'S HEAVY LOAD

"DON'T move!"

Tubby knew that when Rob Blake spoke in that tense way he meant what he said; so, although he felt an inclination to shrink back from that terrible vision of an enraged bobcat, he managed to grit his teeth together and hold his ground.

Ralph, Sim and Andy took the admonition to heart as well as did the fat boy, for they seemed rooted to their tracks, all staring as hard as they could up into the lower branches of the tree just in front.

The cat could be plainly seen crouching there, with its ears flattened against its head, after the manner of all enraged felines. It was a pretty "hefty" specimen of its kind, too, Rob saw, much

larger and more powerful than the ordinary cat.

Undoubtedly, it "sensed" a feast beyond the boundary fence, and had started to pay a neighborly visit with dinner in mind when interrupted by the approach of the five boys. Being accustomed to lording it over other animals in its native forests, the wildcat did not fancy beating a retreat simply because some of those two-legged creatures chose to cross its path.

That ominous growl was meant as a warning to them to beware how they incurred its animosity. From the way in which its haunches had settled upon the limb, it appeared as though the beast might be in readiness to make a leap; and it was because of this that Rob had instantly hissed those words.

At the time it chanced he was just a little in the advance; hence his position was more inclined to be a perilous one than could be said of his companions. None of them had any weapon handy with which to defend themselves in case the animal really attacked them; though Sim and Andy immediately began to use their eyes to ad-

vantage in the hope of being able to see a club of some sort, always the first resort of a boy in trouble.

"Tell us what to do, Rob!" urged Sim, who had actually discovered the cudgel he wanted to possess, yet did not dare make a move toward getting it in his grip lest by so doing he tempt the savage beast to spring.

"Stand perfectly still!" ordered the patrol leader. "You can do more good that way than by moving. If we all just stare at him, he'll soon get uneasy, not knowing what to make of such a mysterious crowd. Animals hate to look into human eyes, they say. I've stared a dog out of countenance that way myself."

"Huh!" grunted Tubby, remembering how he had once tried that same game himself with a barking puppy, getting down on his hands and knees to manage better, only to have the little varmint instantly seize hold of his nose and hang on.

"How would it do for all to give a big yell together?" suggested Ralph.

"That might make him jump, I take it," re-

plied Andy Bowles, wishing he had his bugle handy, for with it he could sound a shrill blast that would surely cause the impudent cat to retreat in haste.

"Yes, it would startle him, all right," admitted Rob, "but he might jump the wrong way, and at us. Better try my scheme; it can do no harm, and I don't think he'll attack us unless we begin the fight."

"I see a bully club close by my feet, Rob."

"Well, don't bother trying to get hold of it just yet," urged the other. "But if he should leap at me, see to it you grab that club in a big hurry, and let him have it with a smack. Steady, now, you can see the beast's beginning to get uneasy right along."

"Yes, you're right, he is, Rob," admitted Ralph, with a vein of relief in his voice, for no fellow can entertain the idea of battling bare-handed with a fierce four-footed adversary without shivering; and Ralph knew only too well how even a scratch from the claws of a carnivorous animal may cause blood poisoning if not properly treated in time.

So they all continued to stand there as nearly like statues as their various dispositions would allow, keeping up a battery of staring looks that must have more or less bewildered the intruder.

Tubby heaved a great sigh. It was additionally hard on him, this trying to keep absolutely still, lest by moving an attack be precipitated, the end of which none of them could see.

"Gee whiz! isn't he ever going to skip out?" he groaned, feeling the drops of perspiration gathering on his forehead, and running down his stubby nose, yet being deprived of the satisfaction of taking out his red bandanna and wiping his streaming face as he would have liked.

"Have a little more patience, Tubby," pleaded Sim. "He's getting ready to vamoose the ranch, I tell you. There, didn't you see how he took a quick peek behind him? They say that in a fight the man who looks back is the one who is getting whipped, because he's thinking of beating it. Watch, now, and be ready to give him a parting whoop if he does jump over the fence again."

The strange bobcat somehow found it unpleas-

ant to remain there on private grounds, and with those five queer creatures facing him so mutely. They meant him harm, of that he must have concluded, and perhaps he had better postpone his intended feast on plump fox cubs or young mink. Night would be a better time for his hunting; and a retreat could not be called dishonorable when the enemy counted five against one.

So, finally, he made a quick backward jump that allowed of a new perch just over the dividing fence. This movement was the signal for a sudden change of policy on the part of the boys, for they burst into a series of loud shouts, and Sim instantly darted forward to secure the coveted club.

The wildcat, having concluded to pull out and evidently not liking those aggressive sounds, continued its flight, growling savagely as it went, and looking back once before finally disappearing amidst the foliage of the trees beyond the high fence.

"That was an adventure, sure enough!" exclaimed Sim, breathing hard after his recent exertions. "Just to think of our running across

such a tough customer when Ralph here was speaking about troublesome pests. Do you reckon this was his first visit to your pens, Ralph?"

"I hope and believe so," the other replied, frowning at the same time. "I would hate to learn that it had become a habit with him. Besides, we have seen no signs around to indicate that he'd ever been here before. But the rascal has scented my pets, and will give us no peace until he's done for."

"I should say the same thing!" declared Rob. "It's just like a wolf that threatens a sheep-fold, there can be no safety until he's been potted."

"I'll see Pete at once," continued the other, with a look of determination on his strong face, "and start him out with the dogs. If they're lucky they'll get on the track of the beast before sundown and, I hope, knock him over."

The conversation then was mostly of the woods, and Ralph as well as some of the others mentioned a number of curious circumstances that had come under their observation while camping out. Ralph had formerly been quite a hunter and trapper whenever he had an opportu-

nity, though, as he confessed, latterly the sport seemed to be palling upon him somewhat.

"To tell the truth, Sim," he said, as they strolled back toward the distant farmhouse, after seeing Pete and starting him off with the dogs to look for traces of the feline thief, "I'm getting to be interested in that scheme of hunting with a camera, and I think I'll take it up soon. There are plenty of good chances for doing something of that sort around here, you know. I want you to put me wise to all the wrinkles of the game before you say goodbye, which I hope won't be for quite some time yet."

"What are we going to do this afternoon, boys?" asked Andy.

"Well, if that question is aimed at me," ventured Tubby, quickly, "I know what I'd like to do, that is if Ralph happens to have plenty of ammunition for that bully little Flobert rifle of his. Frogs for mine, thank you. One thing I like about this scheme of shooting the jumpers is it doesn't seem half as cruel as catching them with a hook, even if you do intend to put them out of their misery soon afterwards."

Tubby was known to have a tender heart, and would not hurt anything if he could possibly help it.

Ralph proposed that if the others felt inclined, they might make a run out to a certain lake he knew, where they would likely have a pleasant time.

"Whether we get any bass or not we'll certainly enjoy the run with you, Ralph," Rob told him. "As we've gone to the trouble to fetch some rods and fishing tackle along, it would be a pity not to wet the lines just once. So far as I'm concerned, I only too gladly say 'yes' to your proposition."

Sim and Andy immediately voiced their sentiments in the same way, and so it was settled. Tubby would be fixed out with the small Flobert rifle and a supply of ammunition, also rubber boots, for he might have to do some wading in order to retrieve his game after shooting it. He promised to have a mess of frogs' legs ready for the evening meal when the boys came back.

"See to it that you fellows do your duty with the gamey bass!" he called out as the other four

piled into the big car, ready to start forth.

"I heard you call that young chap, who was filling the gas tank, Peleg; is he one of the workmen on the farm, Ralph?" Rob asked after they had gotten fairly started, for he chanced to be sitting alongside the driver at the time, the other boys occupying the rear seat.

He saw that Ralph had a slight frown on his face, as though something unpleasant had come into his mind just then, possibly induced by mention of the name.

"Yes, his name is Peleg Pinder," he replied in jerky sentences. "His father was a sort of hard case in Wyoming, and the family seemed to be always in a peck of trouble. Some folks said the children'd all be worthless, just like their good-for-nothing dad. Then there was a fire, and Peleg's father was burned trying to save an old crippled woman. Somehow people thought better of him after he died. The children scattered. One girl is working for a farmer seven miles away. My father took Peleg in, and gave him a home. Been with us six months or so now."

"How about his work—he seems lively enough, and good-natured. In fact," continued Rob, "I rather like the sparkle in his eyes."

"Yes, he fooled me right along, too," said Ralph, with a trace of a sneer in his tone. "He does his work so you couldn't really find any fault; but then it's hard to shake off a bad name, and the Pinders always were shiftless and deceitful, Wyoming folks believe."

Rob was interested at once, and for a reason. He hated to see any one "picked on" simply because "people" chose to believe no good could come out of a family that had a shirker for a father. Why, the very fact that poor Pinder had died while performing an act of heroism ought to be enough to prove that such a wholesale condemnation was utterly wrong.

"You've got some sort of reason for saying that, I imagine, Ralph?" he continued, bent on discovering the truth now that he was at it.

"Well, I have, though I didn't mean to mention it to any of you, because for one thing I wanted you to have a jolly time of it here, and without bothering about any of my troubles.

Then, again, I hate to speak ill of anybody, even Peleg Pinder."

"What has he been doing, then, to make you suspect him?" demanded Rob.

After hesitating for a brief interval, as though he hardly knew just how much to say, Ralph went on to explain.

"Hang it all," he commenced, "I hate to say a word about it, because it makes me feel mean, just as if I might be picking on a poor chap who hadn't any other friends but my folks, and who's got a heavy enough load as it is. Believe me, I haven't so much as breathed a word of this to dad. He'd fire Peleg if he knew, and then I might be sorry. But I'm honestly up a stump trying to decide what I ought to do."

"Tell me about it then, Ralph; perhaps I might be able to help you out?" suggested the other.

"All right, then, I will!" declared the driver, as he skillfully avoided a hole in the road ahead. "About three days ago I made a little discovery that bothered me. It seemed that some one was helping themselves to some things I kept in that

room out in the barn, a place I had fitted up a long while ago as a sort of boy's den, you know, where I kept all my treasures, books, games, stamp collection and coins, as well as a lot of other things."

"Yes, I remember you showing us, though you didn't stay in there long, I noticed," Rob went on to remark, significantly.

"That was because I felt bad about something," explained Ralph. "Fact is, I had just made an unpleasant discovery, which was to the effect that some one had for the second time been poking around among my things, and carried off a number of packets of valuable stamps that I knew positively I had left there on the desk, meaning to return them to the dealer."

"But if this happened once before," said Rob, "how did it come you neglected to put a padlock on the door?"

"I had my reasons," answered Ralph stoutly, and with a flash of fire in his eyes. "First, because I hated to think that anything had to be locked up so as to keep employees about the

place from helping themselves. Second, I wasn't quite sure that my first loss was a certainty. Then again, Rob, I was figuring on laying some sort of trap so as to catch the rascal in the act, and settle the business."

"But now you are sure a light-handed fellow has taken your things, what do you expect to do about it?" queried Rob.

"I ought to warn my father," said the other, regretfully. "He hates a thief above all things. I'm sure he would discharge Peleg in a hurry. You see, Peleg has always been allowed to enter my den as he pleased; in fact, anybody could, because I trust the men who work for us."

"Well," Rob continued, significantly, "I hope before you tell your father you let me try to identify the thief, because I don't believe it can be Peleg Pinder."

CHAPTER VII

TURNING IT OVER TO ROB

RALPH turned hastily and gave Rob a strange look. Unconsciously he was already beginning to realize that Rob Blake could always be depended on to do the right thing when it came to a question of action.

"You've got a reason for talking like that, I'm sure, Rob?" he observed.

"I admit it," came the answer, without the slightest hesitation. "Tell me first if you positively know that Peleg took your things?"

"Well, the evidence is only what you might call circumstantial," admitted the other. "I remembered seeing him going hurriedly out of the barn an hour before I showed you and the rest of the fellows through there. He acted a bit guilty. I thought he avoided us; but the poor fellow has always been somewhat shy about

meeting strangers, because he must know some mention will be made of his history, and that of his family. No, I can't say I've got any positive proof he is the guilty one, if that's what you mean."

"I'll tell you something, Ralph," said the patrol leader, quietly. "Perhaps it may not mean much to you; but when a fellow becomes a scout, you see, he begins to study character, and notices a good many little things that show which way the wind blows, just as straws are said to do."

"Go on, then, please; I'll be glad to hear what you have to say, Rob."

"It happened that when I was alone this morning I took a little stroll back of the barns, just to amuse myself by looking at the pigs, for they're always amusing, in my mind. There I ran across Peleg, though at the time I didn't know that was his name, or anything about him. What do you suppose the boy was doing?"

"Oh! I couldn't guess in a year," replied the other.

"Well, he had managed to pick up a young crow that had in some way broken its wing and

couldn't fly," continued Rob, with a smile. "I suppose it would have been put out of its misery in a hurry by any ordinary farm hand; and perhaps Peleg himself might have fired at the black thieves if he found them getting at the corn in the field. But a wounded bird, and one in pain, distressed him. He was trying to mend that broken wing, and I found myself interested in watching how he succeeded."

"That's sure a queer thing for a farm boy to do," admitted Ralph. "What could have been his idea, do you think?"

"I imagine he had more than one," Rob replied, soberly enough. "In the first place, he was sorry for the poor thing, for he handled it as tenderly as if it had been a human being. Then I actually suspect that the boy has, deep down in his heart, a vague desire to do surgical work, though you might find it hard to believe."

Ralph whistled.

"You don't say?" he ejaculated, looking as though he hardly knew whether to laugh at the idea, or take what Rob was explaining seriously.

"I told you I was interested," the other went

on, "and I asked him a number of questions as to who had showed him how to go about mending a bird's broken wing in that way. He said no one had, but it just seemed to be the natural thing for him to do. Honestly, Ralph, when I saw what a clever job he made of it I knew that boy had the making of a grand surgeon in him, if ever he found a chance to do the proper studying. It's a gift, you know, with some people, and money can never purchase it. Clever surgeons are born, not made."

Again Ralph puckered up his lips, and gave vent to a whistle, which seemed to be his pet way of expressing surprise.

"All that is mighty interesting, I own up, Rob," he said, presently, after he had taken a little time to think matters over. "If it hadn't been for this unfortunate happening, I'd be tickled half to death to try and encourage Peleg if he had secret ambitions that way. But why do you think, because he bothered mending a broken wing for a young crow, that he couldn't have robbed me?"

"For this reason," replied Rob. "Remember,

I may turn out wrong, but I'm going on general principles when I say that I never yet have found that a fellow with such a tender heart could really be a bad case. So, on the strength of my observations, I want you to promise me that you'll suspend sentence on Peleg until you have more positive proof."

"I agree, and only too willingly," said Ralph. "In fact, I'll be glad to turn the whole case over into your hands for settlement. Do just whatever you think best about it. If you need any help, call on me. I'd be mighty glad to learn I was doing Peleg an injustice; for I'd try and make it up to him in every way I could. Shake hands on that, Rob, will you?"

So the agreement was ratified, and the other boys in the back seat did not even know what their chums had been discussing. It happened that Sim and Andy were engaged in a heated argument concerning something that they did not think the same about.

Shortly afterwards they arrived at the lake where they expected to do their fishing. A boat was procured, and after they had purchased some

live bait from a man who lived near the water they started forth.

This was a sport which Rob and his two chums always enjoyed very much. Perhaps they might not meet with such good luck as if they had come early in the morning; but, then, no one can tell when the bass will take hold. It often happens that on a hot and still day nothing may be done until along about four in the afternoon when a breeze arises, with a spatter of rain in the bargain. Somehow, every fish in the lake seems to get ravenously hungry all at once, judging from the way in which they snap at any kind of bait.

"Let's hope some such good luck comes our way, then," remarked Sim, when Ralph had mentioned this peculiarity in connection with the gamiest fish that swims in fresh water, barring none. "The day has been warm and still enough, for that matter. There are signs of a shower later on, if those clouds mean anything over in the southwest. I guess we'd better not go too far away, Ralph, because for one I'd hate to get soaked through and through."

"I'm taking the waterproof coverings from the car along, so that in case it does rain we can keep fairly dry," explained Ralph, as they started forth.

For an hour they had very little luck. Then the conditions mentioned by Ralph seemed to suddenly come about, for the clouds covered the heavens, a breeze sprang up, and drops of rain began to fall.

"I've got one, and a hard fighter!" shouted Sim, as he bent his energies to the task of successfully playing his victim in order to tire the fish out, so a landing net might be successfully used.

"Here's another, and just as big as yours, Sim!" ejaculated Andy from the bow.

By the time Sim managed to boat his catch, Rob was busily engaged; and, in turn, Ralph found plenty to do in handling an even more vicious fighter.

"Say, this is the best fishing I ever struck!" admitted Sim, some time later, as he cracked another capture on the head with a billet of wood in order to put it out of suffering, and then de-

posited the victim with a dozen others lying in the bottom of the boat.

The fun kept up furiously for half an hour more. Then the bass ceased biting almost as suddenly as they had commenced. Perhaps the fact that the clouds had broken, allowing the sun to shine again, had something to do with this change.

"We ought to be satisfied!" declared Andy, "after all that fun. I reckon we must have as many as twenty bass in the boat, running as high as three pounds, and enough to make a meal for two families."

"Dandy fighters every one of 'em!" added Sim, "and I'll remember this afternoon, I tell you, Ralph. This is a great little lake, and doesn't seem to be fished to death, either."

"No, the people down at Wyoming seem to prefer going to several other lakes and streams nearer at home," the other explained. "Besides that, most of them are born trout fishermen. You know, some fellows pretend to look down on black bass as game fish."

"Well, they don't know what a fighter is, then,

that's all," asserted Andy. "My stout rod bent nearly double many a time when they bore down. 'Course a bass doesn't jump for a fly like a trout, just sucks it in; but once hooked I'll match him against anything that wears fins and scales."

They were now ready to quit and start for home. Ralph wanted to stop on the way and leave a portion of the catch with a poor widow who had a brood of children.

"We couldn't begin to eat them all, you know," he told the others. "I'm sportsman enough to stop taking fish when some one can't use them. Mrs. Murphy has a hard time getting on with her family. We all like to give her a hand when we can. Many's the string of fish I've left at her door, even when I had to go home without any myself. But, then, I'm not very fond of bass for eating, much as I love to feel them pull at the end of my line."

"What was that you were saying about our going in to town tomorrow, Ralph?" asked Sim, when they were well on their way home.

"Why, there's going to be a pretty fine entertainment, and I thought you'd like to hear that

girl sing dad was telling you about. We believe she's going to make her mark on the opera stage some of these days. So, if you're agreeable, we'll run in."

It was decided that way, and not one of them dreamed how a strange Destiny was shaping her ends in beckoning them toward the town of Wyoming after nightfall, yet such really proved to be the case.

CHAPTER VIII

A GREAT DAY FOR WATER SPORT

"I GUESS you're taking us home by another road, eh, Ralph?" remarked Sim.

"Noticed where I cut loose from the main line, did you?" laughed the pilot. "Well, we can strike it again further on."

"Want us to see more of the country; or is there something special up this way?" queried the visiting Jeffords boy.

"Well, partly that. Mrs. Murphy lives on this dirt road, you see; and I've got that nice string of fish to leave at her house. There, you can see the cottage over yonder. She's always so glad to have a batch of bass. As I said before, she has a big family, and not much money to run it on."

Soon afterwards they stopped in front of a modest cottage, where several half-grown chil-

dren were playing in the yard. Immediately loud shouts attested to the fact that they had recognized Ralph. Accordingly, there was a rush for the road, so that when the widow came out, attracted by their cries, the entire family surrounded the car.

The fish were duly delivered, and Mrs. Murphy, as usual, was lavish with her sincere thanks. Rob and his chums were interested. This sort of thing happened to be along the lines of their own doings; since nothing pleased them more than to do something for those who were in need of assistance.

Besides, it raised Ralph higher in their esteem than before. Rob privately made up his mind that a fellow who could be thinking of others so much of the time as Ralph did, and who delighted to be of help to those in need, would make the finest sort of a scout leader. He was more determined than ever that before leaving the Jeffords farm he must convert Ralph, and start him on the road to organize a troop of scouts in Wyoming, this time along true lines, so that the town would be proud to acknowledge them as repre-

senting the best that was in American boys.

Just as the pilot had said, they soon came out again on the main road, and in due time arrived home. The first thing they saw was Tubby, sitting there on the front steps leading to the long porch, where he might just as well have occupied a comfortable chair, but, being a boy, he chose to camp out on the steps.

He waved a hand at them, and seemed to be smiling broadly, from which those who knew Tubby so well were able to draw certain conclusions.

"I wager Tubby's had a fine afternoon's sport," remarked Andy Bowles.

"Oh! it doesn't take so very much to make him grin from ear to ear; and it's some stretch, at that," chuckled Sim.

"I think he's a mighty fine fellow, if you asked my opinion," remarked Ralph.

"You wouldn't be a bit off the road there, either," Rob told him. "Tubby has the best disposition of any boy I know. There isn't anything he wouldn't do for another fellow; and the best of it is he never stops to consider whether

it's a friend or an enemy he's trying to help; though, for that matter, Tubby has so few enemies they hardly count."

The object of this side talk now sauntered up. He looked rather the worse for wear, his trousers being muddy, and his face still rosy from exertion.

"Got a pretty nice mess of bass, didn't you, fellows?" he remarked, as Sim lifted the string, and tossed the catch out of the car.

"Oh! that's just half of all we took," Andy hastened to explain. "You see, there were too many for our own use, and Ralph here had an old lady friend with a big family on her hands, who looks to him to keep her supplied with fresh fish; so we dropped the other string at her house on the way home. How did you come out with your frog hunting, Tubby?"

"I had just a glorious time of it, Andy," the other replied. "Come over to the ice-house and see, for they're keeping cool until it's time to cook them for our supper. Better fetch the fish along with you, too, while about it."

All of them followed him across the yard to

the ice-house. This was so built that it could be used to take the place of a refrigerator; and fresh meat, butter and such things were kept there nice and sweet.

Tubby swooped down and lifted a platter that was covered with green leaves. As he removed these there were revealed several rows of "saddles," as the long hindlegs of bullfrogs are called in the market, where they bring as much as eighty cents a pound, sometimes even more, according to supply and demand, and are considered a great delicacy by epicures.

"They look pretty fine to me, Tubby," said Rob, admiringly. "How many did you knock over with the little Flobert rifle?"

"Well, you know, I'm kind of systematic in my ways, boys," Tubby explained. "So in the beginning I set a limit, and when I got to the twenty-five mark I quit business. Jiminy crickets! I could have had a hundred as well as not, if I had been greedy; but you know that isn't in my line. They are such busters, too; why, a fellow couldn't get away with more than four such monster saddles unless he turned out to be a hog."

"Only four apiece," said Sim, pretending to look sad.

"But some people don't care for frogs' legs, I'm told," Tubby admonished him, as he shot a look toward Ralph, who not long before had said something to that effect, it may be remembered.

"You've got something else on your mind," suggested Andy, who knew the signs; "better open up and tell us what's happened while we were gone. You never were built to keep a secret; it shows in your face right away."

"Oh! well, I meant to tell you about it, boys. Look here, what do you think of this?" and as he spoke Tubby turned around, pushed a piece of burlap aside, and showed them an object hanging by a piece of rope, a rather ghastly object, too.

"Wow! a turtle, with its throat cut!" exclaimed Andy, staring as though he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Did you shoot that big snapper?" demanded Ralph. "Why, he would have taken a piece out of your leg if ever he managed to get a hold.

A fellow has to be pretty careful how he handles a snapping turtle."

"Well, he just missed me by an inch," said Tubby, proudly. "After that I was fighting shy of that head when it darted at you like lightning. You see, I came on this whopper while I was moving around the pond, trying to see some of the frogs squatting among the grass and reeds and moss. I don't know why a turtle should be out of the water and up on the bank, except it comes out to lay its eggs, they say, and then in the Spring; but there it was, and when I almost stepped on it, it gave a wicked lunge at me."

"Quite exciting, wasn't it, Tubby?" laughed Andy.

"To me it was," admitted the fat boy, unconcernedly. "I made up my mind I ought to capture that fellow. They say snappers are death to frogs, and ducks, and even fish; but as I didn't dare touch the crawler, I hunted up a stout stick and tried to turn him over. My stars! he struck it hard, and held on like a bulldog, but I managed to drag him further up on the bank. I was wondering what I should do with him when Peleg



"He held 'on like a bull-dog."—Page 94

came along, and saw what I had found. He told me you could eat snappers; and while I drew his head as far out as I could,—I mean the turtle's, of course,—him holding on to the stick like grim death, why, Peleg used his knife to end his troubles. So here he is or she is, I don't know which; and if Ralph says the same as Peleg did, and that snappers can be eaten, why we stand to have turtle steak and turtle soup."

Ralph admitted that he had partaken of snapping turtle diet on more than one occasion, and found it fairly to his liking, though he did not really "hanker" after the dish any more than he did frogs' legs.

"These other red-marked paddlers are better," he told them. "Though I guess none of them come up to the green turtle found in the Southern waters near the coast, or the diamond-back terrapin of Maryland and Virginia. But I'm glad you got this one, Tubby, because these snappers do a heap of damage, and are of no earthly good. I've lost dozens of young goslings and ducks through this fellow and his kind."

"One thing sure," Tubby went on to say, with

apparent delight, "today has been a red-letter day for hauling in a mess of food of all sorts from the water. Just to think, we've got fresh fish, frogs' legs, and turtle to choose from."

"Better jot it down in your diary as Marine Day," laughed Andy.

"We'll leave the turtle for tomorrow," suggested Ralph. "Two kinds of fish ought to be enough for one meal. I'll take the bass every time. But here's Peleg, ready to do the job of getting them fixed for the pan," as the half-grown farm boy made his appearance.

"'Tain't fair, let me tell you," complained Tubby. "Here I went and prepared *my* catch, all but the turtle, so they could be dipped in cracker crumbs, and dropped in sizzling hot lard, or else fried alongside salt port. You fellows get off too easy by having Peleg do the work."

He forgot all about this, however, in asking after the particulars of the fishing trip; and, upon learning how the bass bit so fiercely, Tubby declared he would like to make one of the next party that visited the lake.

"Frog hunting is all very fine," he admitted

without a bit of shame; "but it gets monotonous after a while. I like a little variety in my sport. Besides, the poor greenbacks haven't a ghost of a chance before that little Flobert of yours, Ralph, which shoots so straight you only have to take aim, pull the trigger, and that ends it. Now a bass on a light rod makes some excitement; and there's always a chance for him to give you the merry ha-ha by breaking away. Yes, next time count me with you, please."

They took things easy the rest of the afternoon, having enjoyed the day very much. All sorts of plans were suggested for the future, some of which were never to be carried out, for the simple reason that events, which none of the boys could foresee, were on the eve of coming to pass.

So the night came on. Supper was somewhat later than usual on account of Mr. Jeffords having been away on a business trip to town, and coming home along toward twilight, long after the sun had set in a blaze of glory.

The feast of frogs' legs proved quite satisfactory to those who were fond of such a diet.

Besides, there was a fine mess of bass, done to a turn by the colored mammy in the kitchen, who certainly knew the secret of making various dishes appear very tempting and appetizing; as well as roast chicken, corn, new potatoes, and last, but far from least, two kinds of pies that equalled the product of any New England kitchen.

All of the boys were hungry when they sat down to the table, but by the time half an hour had gone by Tubby was seen to hardly shake his head when asked to have another helping. Andy Bowles undid his belt when he thought no one was looking his way, both of which incidents went to tell the story of "enough being as good as a feast."

They had just about made up their minds to leave the table when excited voices reached them. Then Peleg came hurrying in, looking anxious. He said something to Mr. Jeffords in a low voice, at which the farmer seemed shocked.

"What is it, Father?" demanded Ralph.

"It's Mrs. Holcomb come over to tell us that one of her children has been lost in the woods

since early this morning," said Mr. Jeffords. "Her husband has been searching everywhere, and now they call on us to help them find the poor lost darling. Ralph, get the car, and we'll take her back with us."

CHAPTER IX

THE SCOUT LAW

ROB and his three chums were immediately interested in this new and peculiar happening. They had had more or less experience along somewhat similar lines on a former occasion, and knew the value of enlisting scouts, with their knowledge of woodcraft, when any one chanced to be missing.

The woman came into the room just then. She looked greatly distressed, though evidently trying hard to control her feelings.

Questions that met with ready replies soon put them in possession of such facts as were at her disposal. The child was a small boy named Caleb, not over six years of age, though hardy enough. He had never wandered off before, so that they suspected something unusual must have tempted him on this occasion.

It had not been until ten o'clock that he was missed. Then the mother and the other children looked high and low for him without avail. Finally, becoming anxious, she had sent out into the fields where her husband was working, and soon everybody around the region had enlisted in the hunt.

As the river ran not more than a quarter of a mile away from the Holcomb home, there were grave fears lest the child might have wandered that way. Some were even looking along the bank with the idea that the body would be cast ashore; others, including the now frenzied father, were engaged in scouring the woods, calling out the name of the little fellow from time to time, and then stopping to learn if a feeble answer came in reply to their hails.

Rob knew that it might mean a long and difficult hunt. He also understood what an advantage it always was to be prepared for such things.

"I saw one of those hand electric torches in your den, Ralph," he went on to say in his energetic fashion. "Do you know whether it has a working battery in it?"

"To be sure it has," he was told. "I only brought it home with me last week when I was down in the town, and haven't used it an hour since."

"I'm glad to know it. Please fetch it along," Rob told him. "Torches may be all very well as a makeshift, but give me such a light as yours when you want to look into out of the way places. Besides, in trailing on a dark night they can't be equaled. I've used one many a time."

Ralph instantly realized that perhaps these scout visitors of his might come in very handy in an emergency like this. That mention of "trailing" gave him an insight into the probable plan of campaign which Rob was likely to institute; and so Ralph made up his mind that it would be a good thing to hand the manipulation of affairs over to the boy in khaki who seemed to know just what to do, as well as how to do it.

They lost little time in getting ready. Ralph soon had the car at the door, and they commenced to pile in, after Mrs. Holcomb had been tucked away in the capacious rear seat. Rob noticed with more or less interest that Peleg insisted on

joining the party, as though just as eager to have a hand in finding the lost boy as any of them.

From time to time some one would ask more questions. Rob in particular seemed to want to find out all he could before arriving on the ground. These queries as a rule turned on such points as the last that had been seen of little Caleb, and whether he had any friends living near by whom he would be likely to want to visit, though possibly getting lost while on the way there.

In this way Rob picked up more or less information that might come in useful later, when on the ground. Ralph heard how he managed to draw these more or less important facts from the now sobbing mother. He also admired the way in which Rob told her not to worry, for they were almost certain to find her boy before morning.

About this time Tubby thought he ought to say a few words in order to help comfort the sorely stricken woman.

"You know, ma'm," he told her, for he chanced to be sitting alongside Mrs. Holcomb at the

time, "we scouts are trained in the art of tracking people as well as animals. Why, several times we've proved that we could find a lost party when no one else knew how to go about it. It is scout law to respond to any call for help, and we're just bound to do all we can. Yes, ma'm, there was a poor half-demented man lived down in Hampton who used to be watched by his folks very close; but, in spite of it all, one time he managed to give 'em the slip, and went into the scrub, which, down on Long Island, is like a wilderness, and easy to get lost in."

Tubby waited a few seconds so as to get his second breath, and then went on with his story, which he meant to be comforting to the poor mother.

"After they had searched and searched for two days they came to the scouts and begged us to please lend a hand. By that time the trail had grown pretty cold, you see, but Rob here went at it like he always does, with a vim, and I give you my word for it, ma'm, before three hours had passed we found the man, though he was——"

"That'll do, Tubby, don't bother with the particulars!" interrupted Rob, fearing that the benefit which the recital was intended to have upon the overwrought nerves of the poor woman might lose something of its value if Tubby told that the demented man was really dead when they finally found him in the scrub oak wilderness a mile or two back from the beach.

Ralph was at the wheel, and he knew his road, so that before a great while they drew near the place where the Holcombs lived. The woman had driven over in a buggy, but her rig could be recovered later on. Time was too valuable to allow her to return home in the same tedious manner as she had come.

"Looky yonder, will you?" burst out Tubby. "What are those lights glimmering in the woods over yonder? Seem like a pack of giant fire-flies to me. Rob, do you reckon they can be lanterns carried by some of the people who are searching everywhere, helter-skelter like, for little Caleb?"

"Just what they are, Tubby," replied the scout leader; "and, as you say, they are likely enough

running this way and that without a bit of reason. Why, they would go over the same ground a dozen times, and skip lots of places that ought to be looked into. We'll try to lay out a concerted plan of action—that is, in case there isn't any trail to be found."

"I'm a bit afraid we won't have much luck in that quarter, Rob," said Sim. "When you come to think of it, a little fellow like a six-year-old doesn't make much of a dent when he steps out, like a heavy man would, or Tubby here."

"Still, there are ways of following a trail besides always seeing the impression of feet," hinted Rob. "But wait and see how we fare. The ground must be in pretty good condition for tracking, under the trees. Even a small chap like him could turn over the pine needles as he tramped along, and you can always tell that by the freshness of those that are disturbed—those on top, you know, look faded in the sun and air and rain."

Ralph listened and nodded his head in approval. Such confident talk aroused his sincere admiration. He felt more than ever that Rob must

be a remarkable boy; and if the mere fact of being a scout could account for any degree of his cleverness, then perhaps this education they spoke of, running along the lines of a knowledge of woodcraft, first aid to the injured, preparedness, lending a helping hand, and all that sort of thing might not be such a bad subject, after all, to study. Somehow, his opinion of scouts in general was undergoing a steady change. He meant to keep tabs on every action of these four fellows, now that they were face to face with another emergency. If they could come out of this difficulty as successfully as Rob had done when that boy with the dislocated shoulder fell into his charge, Ralph would be almost ready to surrender and admit he had been badly mistaken.

When they arrived at the house it was to find quite a gathering of neighboring women present. Rob knew nothing was to be gained by coming in contact with these people, for while their intentions might be commendable, they were only apt to hinder the work with their questions, and by advancing impossible theories.

He asked Mrs. Holcomb to please let him speak with her oldest girl, who, it appeared, had been the last one to notice little Caleb before the fact of his vanishing had become known.

All Rob wanted to learn was about the time of day this happened, and in which quarter the child had been at the time. To his mind that would mark the beginning of the trail, and he did not mean to have any of the women around when starting to search for the tiny tracks.

Just as he expected, no one had as yet thought to search the ground for signs of the wanderer's shoe prints; instead of that, they had scattered through the woods, or rushed madly away toward the river, hoping to find the boy before anything serious happened to him.

Rob soon learned the few things the half-grown girl could tell him between her violent sobs.

"Now come with me, fellows, and we'll start off," he told the others as they gathered eagerly around him.

Mr. Jeffords continued with them. Something seemed to tell him that these wide-awake and

up-to-date scouts would have a much better chance of getting results than all those husky men who were roaming the woods at random, shouting to one another, or else calling out the name of the child.

Arriving at the spot where the girl said the small boy had last been seen, Rob asked the others to stay at a certain place while he and Sim used the electric torch in the endeavor to find the first trace of those tiny footprints.

The night had set in quite dark by now, so that only for the glow of that useful little torch they would have had to depend wholly on the lanterns Peleg and Ralph carried.

Shooting the strong white light downward, the two boys proceeded to look thoroughly about them, scanning every object that fell in their way, and utilizing their utmost stock of woodcraft in the work.

When possibly five minutes had elapsed, though it certainly seemed much longer than that to the waiting group close by, Sim gave utterance to a cry of exultation that thrilled the others.

"Found the trail, have you, fellows?" called out Ralph, excitedly.

"Come over here and see," Rob told him.

He made them act cautiously, so that they might not blot the "signs" out by their own footprints. He pointed to the plain impression of a tiny shoe in the soft earth. There could be no doubt but that the mark had been made by Caleb; and, it was agreed, if only they could successfully follow where that trail led, they would sooner or later know where the child had gone.

"Try and see if you can follow it, Rob," urged Tubby, impatiently, though there was also a confident ring to his voice, as well as a suspicion of pride about his manner, for he fully believed that the ability of the scouts in a case of this kind was about to be vindicated.

They watched with an eagerness words could hardly paint, while Rob, accompanied by Sim, began to slowly move along. There was a growing confidence in the way the trackers took up their task that promised well for the success of the enterprise. Ralph felt his heart beating tumultuously in his breast as he mentally pictured

the ecstatic joy of restoring the lost child to his distracted mother's arms.

They were moving steadily along. Now and then Rob would pause for a brief period of time, perhaps to make sure that he was on the right track, or it might be to show the others something that caused them increasing satisfaction.

Forgotten were all the other searchers in the Adirondack woods; let them rush this way and that in their hunt without a method; but the scouts were on the right track, and if fortune were kind, they meant to follow it to success.

CHAPTER X

A WILD GRAPEVINE ROPE

THEIR progress was of necessity tedious, but what did that matter, so long as it was sure? A tender little fellow like Caleb could not cover a very great distance before giving out, when he would be forced to drop to the ground, perhaps yielding to a desire to go to sleep.

Tubby and Andy were discussing this very thing, as they came along after the two leaders. Occasionally Ralph joined in the conversation.

"How far do you think a little chap like that could cover from morning up to now?" Tubby asked.

"Oh! not over a couple of miles, I should say, but at the most twice that far," Andy replied, after giving the matter a little thought. "Even at that he'd be apt to repeat, that is, wander around in a circle, so at the end of the day he

mightn't be over a full mile from where he started."

"But they said the river was only a quarter of a mile off," suggested Tubby, darkly.

"Get that notion out of your head to begin with, please," interrupted Ralph. "I'm glad to tell you that we've been going in a course that would never fetch out at the river; fact is, it lies almost directly the other way."

"Oh! I'm glad of that, Ralph, and thank you for telling us about it!" ejaculated Tubby, with a heavy sigh of relief. "Because right along I've been picturing little Caleb falling in, and no one near to hear his cries for help. Then, if he isn't drowned, we're just bound to find him."

The same confidence seemed to possess Andy Bowles after hearing Ralph say there was no danger of running across the swift river in this direction. Meanwhile, those in the van were making steady progress. Their little difficulties did not seem to daunt them in the least, for after a brief pause now and then they would always proceed with the same assurance, as though positive of their movements.

Ralph presently drew a little closer to the leaders. He knew that they consulted from time to time, and he wished to be near enough to catch what was said, for by degrees Ralph was finding himself becoming more and more interested in all that pertained to the education of a scout. He knew no better way in which to pick up sterling points than by listening.

Later on, after they had been progressing in this fashion for upwards of a whole hour, he heard Rob saying something that interested him very much.

"See how he wobbles from side to side as he goes on, will you, Sim? That shows he must have been getting pretty tired about the time he reached here."

"That's a fact, Rob," added the other scout, anxiously. "It wouldn't surprise me a whit if we ran across the poor little chap somewhere about here fast asleep. I don't believe there's any wild animal around that would hurt him, do you?"

"Hardly, unless that savage old cat we saw up at Ralph's pens had wandered over this way,

which isn't likely. I'm throwing the light on either side now, you notice, as we go along. Little Caleb may have come part way back again before dropping."

"How would it do for the rest of us to spread out with the lanterns, and keep on the watch, Rob?" asked Ralph just then.

"Such a move would do no harm, anyhow," the other replied, knowing very well how anxious all of them must be to feel that they were having a share in the work.

After that they continued on for some time. Rob was more than ever convinced the lost child had reached a point bordering on exhaustion, and that on no account could such a weak little chap keep on his feet much longer.

Several times they had seen moving lights, showing that some of the searching party must be close by; indeed, they heard their shouts at stated intervals, though not replying to them.

"It seems queer to me," Tubby was saying to Andy and Mr. Jeffords and Peleg, all of whom were near him at the time, "how none of these men with lanterns have run across the boy if,

as we believe, he's close by here. I should think he'd have heard their calls and tried to answer them; that is, unless he's sleeping like a dog, being tired to death."

"Chances are that's what's the matter with him," Andy agreed; whereupon both boys settled down to anticipating a cry of joy from those in the advance as they suddenly came upon the object of their search, lying asleep amidst the dead leaves just as the famous "Babes in the Woods" had done in the story.

So vastly superior was their method of search over that resorted to by the frenzied father, and the equally unreliable neighboring farmers, that Ralph was ready to give the scouts all the credit they so fully deserved. He only awaited the final stroke before confessing as to the great change in his belief.

Then Sim was heard to give vent to a cry. Somehow, it pierced the heart of Tubby just as a dart might have done, because he failed to detect the note of conscious triumph that he had so firmly anticipated. Instead, the cry seemed of surprise and consternation.

"Oh! what is it, boys?" Tubby called out, with his voice all unstrung. "I hope now you haven't found him as we did that poor demented man, you know?"

"We haven't found him at all, yet," answered Sim, after drawing a long breath, like one who was trying to steel his faint heart against a shock; "but come here, all of you, and see what we *have* struck."

At that the others hastened to advance, and were speedily alongside Rob and Sim and Ralph, for the last-named had gained their side almost immediately after the first alarm had sounded.

"Great governor! what's this?" cried Andy.

"Why, it's a gaping hole in the ground, I do believe!" gasped Tubby. "Oh! do you think the poor darling has fallen in there, Rob?" and his usually florid face seemed almost pallid with the horror that seized upon him as he turned a beseeching look upon the scout leader.

Rob once more threw the light from the torch upon the ground close to the edge of that yawning aperture.

"It looks that way, I must own," he told them.

"See, here are plain prints of his little shoes close to the brink. Yes, and you can see where some slender bush was dragged, roots and all, from here—the chances are he unconsciously clutched them when he felt himself slipping, and pulled it in with him. Poor little chap, what a terrible shock he must have had."

All of them stared down into the aperture, but even the light from the hand torch failed to show them what lay below. They could catch glimpses of a rough, rocky wall, projecting roots of trees, and some sort of growing bushes, but if the child were down there they failed to discover anything of him.

"Well, who's going down?" demanded Tubby, as though it were a foregone conclusion in his mind that such a course must follow. "I'd offer in a minute, only I'm sure Rob wouldn't let me try it, while there are so many others present better fitted for the job than I am. But somebody must go down, and how can it be done when we haven't got a sign of a rope with us?"

"Do you think I could risk dropping down by holding to the face of the wall, Rob?" asked

Sim, quickly. If the other had answered in the affirmative, there was no question but that he stood ready to make the attempt without delay.

"Wait a bit and we'll see," the scout leader told him. "No need of doing anything in such a hurry. If Caleb's down there, a few minutes more or less won't hurt much; and it may mean a broken leg for you, Sim, if you slipped. I've got an idea that may pan out, and make up for the lack of a rope. - Just back there I noticed a wild grapevine hanging from a tree. If we could cut that free, we might have a pretty good substitute for a rope, something like twenty feet long."

"Fine for you, Rob!" cried Ralph, overcome with admiration. "How lucky you asked me for my little camp hatchet before we started out. Perhaps now you even anticipated having just such a need for the same! I'm beginning to believe you can see further ahead than any fellow I ever met."

Rob made no response, although naturally enough this sort of genuine praise must have been pleasant to him; especially when coming

from a fellow like the Adirondack boy, whom he was aching to convert to a new belief regarding the value scouts may have in a community.

Rob was already hacking away with a vim at the wild grapevine mentioned, having given the hand torch into the charge of Sim. It did not require many blows to sever the vine near its base, for Ralph apparently believed in keeping a fine cutting edge on his pet tool.

Once it was free, they seized hold and commenced to heave, but, of course, this was an effort without any response; the vine was too safely anchored to the branches of the tree to be dragged loose as easily as all that.

"Let me shin up, and cut it free, Rob," suggested Sim, who was a great climber in his way, and never so happy as when sporting amidst the foliage of some great oak or beechnut tree.

"All right, if you say so, Sim," the scout leader told him. "Be sure and get all the length you can, because we may need it. There's no telling just how deep that hole will turn out to be."

"The poor little thing, to think of him falling

all the way down there!" Tubby was heard to say in sympathetic tones.

Agile Sim had already tucked the camp hatchet safely in his belt, and taking a good hold of the swaying vine started his ascent. Some of the others clutched it below so as to give him a steady support. Sim proved his ability as a climber by the rapid way in which he passed up among the lower branches of the tree to which the wild grapevine was attached.

Turning the light upward, Rob could follow the progress of the climber, and found it convenient to call out occasionally in order to advise Sim.

"Not less than twenty feet, and five more if you can make it, Sim!" he told the other. "I should think it would be thick enough to hold a ton if it's only an inch through; these grapevines are tougher than any rope ever made. There, try and do your cutting where you are. Once you get it through, we'll start to drag again, and I reckon it's bound to come next time."

A minute later Sim announced that his part of the work had been completed, upon which

Rob and Ralph and the others laid hold with such a will that they soon had the severed vine on the ground.

After that Sim joined them, coming sliding down the trunk of the tree with the agility of a monkey.

The vine was carried over to where they had discovered that gaping aperture into which it seemed likely little Caleb had fallen. None of the boys seemed in any humor for joking just then; indeed, they were unusually grave, as though the shadow of some impending tragedy hung over their heads.

Rob directed operations, and even Ralph seemed only too willing to do whatever he was told. Strange, how in emergencies, it is always the strong mind that seizes the reins, and all others readily acquiesce, no matter in whatever shape the orders come. How many a desperate enterprise has been carried to a glorious success simply because a fit leader has developed when the conditions demanded; while others that promised well in the beginning have fallen flat through lack of the initiative on the part of the actors.

The vine was allowed to drop into the aperture, with the thick end down. When it seemed as though it rested firmly on something below, Rob judged that the hole must be all of twenty-three feet deep. That was a startling fact when they remembered that a child had stepped into that break and must have gone headlong down through space.

CHAPTER XI

THE RESCUE OF LITTLE CALEB

"Who's going down?" asked Sim, with a vein of entreaty in his voice, for, being such a good climber, Sim would have gladly assumed that role.

"I intend to," replied Rob, calmly, and no one disputed his right, since he occupied the position of scout leader, and could do as he pleased.

He took the torch with him, but as he would probably find a good use for both hands during the descent, Rob managed to secure the light about his person. Then, as he found occasion to make use of it, he could easily do so.

"Hold fast to the old vine, boys, whatever you do," was his last remark as he started to slide over the brink.

Rob seemed perfectly cool. If he felt nervous at all, it was in connection with the possibility

of finding poor little Caleb lying bruised and insensible far below.

The others waited impatiently. Peering over the edge, even as they gripped the end of the wild grapevine, they could follow the descent of their comrade by the aid of the light, for Rob had the battery turned on purposely.

He did not make undue haste, for Rob knew the folly of being too eager. Better consume a little more time, and make sure of results. It was bad enough to have one accident without risking another on top of it.

"There, he's stopping to take a look below!" exclaimed Tubby, breathlessly.

Rob, while holding on with one hand, having found a brace for his feet, had indeed taken out the torch from his upper coat pocket, and was using it to pierce the darkness beneath him.

"Now he acts like he sees something!" cried Sim. "Look at him wave his hand up at us, boys! Anyway, we'll soon know the worst. I'm hoping the little chap may not be so badly hurt."

"Oh! I thought I heard a child give a whimper just then!" gasped Tubby.

All of them fell silent at that, for the same impression occurred to Tubby's companions. They continued to watch Rob with anxious eyes. Yes, he had again started to let himself down, and even as they stared they saw him come to a stop. Apparently, he had found some sort of ledge, though it was covered with a species of growing bush that disguised it effectually. One thing sure, the descent continued even beyond the point where Rob had halted.

"He's found him, as sure as anything, he has!" ejaculated Andy, his voice filled with a strange mixture of satisfaction and awe, for it yet remained to be discovered what the condition of the little fellow might turn out to be.

"Hello! up there!" called Rob, and they believed he was looking upwards at them, though none of them could be sure about this.

"Yes, what is it, Rob? Have you found him?" cried Tubby.

"Yes, I've got him safe," came the reply that thrilled him. "He landed on this ledge, and was saved the balance of the drop. Luckily he dropped on a lot of stuff here that helped to



Presently his head appeared above the brink. —Page 127

break his fall. I don't know for sure, but I believe he's not badly hurt, only cut a little. He must have been stunned, though, for he's only now beginning to wake up. Listen, fellows; do you think you could pull the grapevine up, and me too?"

"Easy thing, Rob," replied Sim, promptly.

"Then take it slow, and don't hurry, or you may brush us off," came from the boy below. "I've got to use one arm holding him, you see, and that handicaps me a bit. Get busy now, boys, heave-o!"

As many as could get hold proceeded to lend a hand, even Peleg exerting himself manfully. The vine began to shorten as they tugged. Every now and then Rob would call out to them, giving further directions. Once he told them to stop, for he had a fine chance to set both feet on another small ledge, and in some fashion could change his burden to the other arm.

Presently his head appeared above the brink. Mr. Jeffords was only waiting for this.

"Let me take the child from you, Rob," he said, leaning over solicitously.

When the transfer had been safely made it was no trouble to help Rob over the edge of the precipice, for such the wall of the aperture appeared to them.

"Mighty well done, I want to tell you, Rob!" said Ralph, earnestly, as he squeezed the hand of the still trembling scout leader, for the recent effort had naturally been quite a strain on the boy's nervous system.

Rob was laughing. After it was all over he effected to make light of his achievement, as that class of boys always do, never liking to hear themselves praised.

"Oh! it was a mere trifle, Ralph, and I'm only sorry I monopolized the fun. But take the light, will you, and turn it on the boy. I want to look him over, and see what the worst is we must expect."

The little fellow presented rather a pitiable aspect. He had received several scratches, and his face was quite bloody; besides that, his clothing was badly torn, possibly brought about through making a passage amidst thorns while lost in the woods.

"Say, he does look pretty bad, now," admitted Tubby, seriously.

"Looks don't count for much, Tubby," Rob soon told him. "We can wash his face and hands, and improve his appearance a hundred per cent; if only he hasn't any broken bones; and, so far, I don't find anything of that kind. It's strange how a child may fall from a fourth-story window and never seem to be hurt. Caleb hit his head, and has lain in something of a swoon for hours. Perhaps it was just as well, for if he had moved, he might have fallen the rest of the way down to the bottom of that hole. He's just beginning to get his senses now, after all this time."

Indeed, they could see the boy's eyes were open, and that he seemed to be trying to understand where he was, what had happened, and who these people around him might be.

"It's all right, Caleb," Ralph hastened to say, soothingly. "You got lost in the woods, you remember; and then you had a nasty tumble; but we've found you, and mean to take you straight home to your mother and father. I'm

Ralph Jeffords, you know; I've often talked with you at your house. So don't worry any about it. How do you come out, Rob; is he hurt badly?"

"I'm glad to tell you that there's really nothing serious the matter," said the other, quickly, much to the delight of Tubby and the others. "Now that he's come-to in earnest, I think he'll soon be himself again. We'll take turns carrying him; and on the way we can stop a bit at that spring we passed, for we ought to make him look more presentable before handing him over to his mother. She'd nearly have a fit if she saw his face all covered with dried blood like that."

Mr. Jeffords insisted on carrying the child for the first stretch, but the boys would only consent on condition that he agreed to let them take turns about. In fact, even Tubby declared it would not be fair to leave him out; and that he meant to have his share of the work.

When they reached the spring mentioned by Rob they halted for a brief time. The child had by that time recovered from his stupor. He whimpered a little when Rob with a wet handkerchief started to wash his face and hands,

for some of the scratches and bumps were evidently quite painful; but this task was soon finished, and the result justified the scout leader's judgment.

"Oh! he looks all right now, for a fact," said Sim. "I consider that we were a lucky bunch all around to find him as neatly as we did. But, then, where there's a will there's a way; and scouts have to learn early in their career never to give up a thing they start on."

Ralph made no comment on hearing his cousin say this; but there was a gleam in his eye that pleased the observing Rob. The latter felt pretty certain that his task of converting the unbeliever was going to be made much easier because of the strange event of that night.

As they drew nearer the home of Caleb, the boys felt a pleasurable anticipation. Remembering the anguish of the poor mother, they could realize how she must suffer, and the thought of being able to bring her speedy relief gave them more or less satisfaction.

When they appeared at the house some of the women discovered them, and must have called

out the good news; for immediately a figure came flying out of the building and straight toward the returning company. It was the frantic mother, wild to know if they had found her child, as well as the condition the little fellow was in.

Great must have been her joy when she heard Caleb calling to her, and she saw him reaching out toward her, even as he was held at the time in Tubby's arms. Well, each one of them felt that it was worth many times the trouble they had taken, just to see the way Caleb's mother hugged him to her heart. About that time it seemed as though Tubby, yes, and all the other fellows as well, had to turn their heads away for some reason or other, and when they came together again most of them were still violently winking.

How she tried to thank them all! When words failed her she actually kissed each one of the five boys. They would never forget that occasion; and as Rob afterwards said, it had been a great privilege to be able to bring such joy to a mother's heart.

Not wishing to wait after they had seen the father recalled from the search by means of a messenger sent out with the glad tidings, the boys entered their car, and with Mr. Jeffords started on the homeward trip.

It seemed hard to believe that so much had been accomplished in such a short interval. Why, only two hours before they had been laughing unconcernedly over the supper table, never dreaming that a sudden emergency would arise to claim their attention. Since then they had been through an experience few fellows ever have come their way.

Rob had spoken to Peleg more than once, but he noticed that Ralph paid no attention to the farm hand. It seemed that the other could not dissuade himself from believing that Peleg must be guilty of pilfering, and on this account he would not have anything more to do with him than he could help; at least, until the mystery was cleared up.

Nevertheless, Rob was feeling more confident than ever that when the truth became known Peleg would be cleared of all suspicion; though just

then he could not even guess how the other's innocence was going to be made clear.

The boys sat down in the big sitting-room for an hour or so before thinking of going to bed. Mrs. Jeffords and the old aunty as well had to hear all the thrilling particulars of the search, and its ultimate conclusion. They also congratulated the scouts on their clever work, Mr. Jeffords describing how wonderfully Rob had followed the faint trail for several miles through the woods.

"I want to say to you, boys," the gentleman wound up with, "that my opinion of this scout business is undergoing a remarkable change. I've learned some wonderful things since you've come among us that have opened my eyes considerably. I'm not saying anything more about it yet, but unless I miss my guess there will be another attempt at starting a scout troop in Wyoming, and this time founded on the right principles."

Those words gave Rob great cheer. He never felt more pride in his khaki uniform and his scout badge than when Mr. Jeffords thus frankly acknowledged that he had been laboring under

a false impression concerning the benefit in a community a well drilled scout troop might prove to be.

When upstairs in the big room, as Ralph was saying good-night to his four guests, he allowed his hand to pass, affectionately, though perhaps unconsciously, along Rob's khaki coat-sleeve, the significance of the action caused the wearer to smile with genuine pleasure.

CHAPTER XII

HOW THE TEST PANNED OUT

ANOTHER day dawned.

The boys had laid out a number of plans for their enjoyment between sunrise and the coming of night. Ralph several times told them not to forget that they were booked for that run in to town after supper, for he was bound to have them hear the "budding nightingale" that Wyoming was so proud of, and who might some day make the name of the town famous.

Tubby coaxed Ralph to get up another fishing party. He wanted to have one shy at those lively bass up in the lake. Andy Bowles, on the other hand, took a notion to spend a little time with the frogs. He admitted that he had grown suddenly fond of the delicacy, and, besides, believed he would enjoy using that fine little Flobert gun.

"Well, don't lay in too big a stock, Andy,"

Tubby warned him, as they were setting off, "because you mustn't forget we're going to have turtle steak and soup today. That ought to be feast enough for once, I should think. Still, if you do get a mess of jumpers I'll help you dispose of them."

The fishing trip turned out very well, though possibly they did not get quite as many as on the previous day. Still, Tubby had the fun of actually taking the biggest prize of the day, a monster who nearly pulled him out of the boat by his sudden and vicious run after snatching the live bait.

Back again at the house they faced an afternoon to fill in with some other sort of "doings." Ralph said he would have a few things to do up at his fur farm, and so Rob accompanied him, as did also Sim, the other two begging off as they claimed to be a bit tired.

"I see Pete has been busy since our last visit!" remarked Ralph, as they drew near the high board-fence, and came in sight of the cabin where the hired man lived while guarding the fur farm.

Following his outstretched hand, they made a

discovery. There, fastened upon the door of the cabin, was a fresh skin, evidently taken lately, since it had not been there on their previous visit.

"That ferocious wildcat, as sure as you live!" ejaculated Sim, in evident delight.

"Yes, Pete got him, for a fact," said Ralph. "I knew he would if anybody could do the job. Now my fur farm is safe again from danger. One such cat can play hob with things; once they get a taste they'll come back again and again until they clean you out."

The boys examined the skin of the wildcat. It was easy to see where Pete had sent his bullet, for they found a ragged hole back of the right foreleg, showing that the hunter's aim had been perfect. Pete, coming up just then, was warmly congratulated by all of them over his good luck. Ralph made him a present of five dollars on the spot.

"Why, it was worth many times that to have this thief put out of the running!" he declared when the man showed an unwillingness to accept the gift.

Some further interesting information was gleaned while once more looking over the big enclosure. This time they were fortunate enough to catch sight of a shy mink, though the animal quickly vanished under a rock at their approach.

"We'll probably never know what sort of success we're meeting with," explained the owner of the fur farm, "especially with regard to the mink and otter, until we decide to thin the animals out some day toward Spring. Then by trapping a certain number, and leaving others to breed, we can tell whether the experiment pays or not. I'm not very strong for it yet, but nothing ventured nothing gained, they say; and I'm having lots of experience, anyway."

Once more back home, they concluded to just "knock around," as Tubby called it, until supper time. Ralph again reminded them that they were billed for town later on, and would not return until well on toward midnight, it might prove.

"Step aside with me, will you, Rob?" he said in the ear of the scout leader.

It was about the middle of the afternoon. Tubby had gone with Andy over to the pond in order to settle some sort of dispute that had arisen between them concerning the distance at which they had made successful shots; while Sim chanced to be upstairs getting a letter written which he wished to mail that evening—some of them declared it was to his “best girl,” at which Sim had only smiled and winked, though later on it proved to be addressed to his mother.

Wondering what Ralph had on foot to make him act so mysteriously, Rob readily followed him, and presently they were out near the big barns.

“Now I’ve got you guessing on account of my being so mysterious, Rob,” began the other, with a short laugh; “but the fact of the matter is I just can’t get that affair out of my mind.”

“Are you referring to Peleg’s case?” asked Rob.

“Yes!” came the reply. “You see, I used to think highly of Peleg, and it hurts me to be keeping this suspicion against him. Rob, I kind of

made up my mind to try him out, test him, as you might say."

"Well, that mightn't be a bad idea, though pretty hard on Peleg," admitted Rob. "Still, it's better to know the truth and have done with it. What have you thought of trying so as to find out whether he would be guilty of stealing or not?"

"I feel a bit ashamed of doing such a thing, too," confessed Ralph, a red spot showing in his cheeks, "but let's hope it turns out a good thing for him. Listen, Rob. Here's my pocketbook, you see? Well, it contains just eleven dollars, which I'm going to count before you, and mostly in small bills, at that. Now, I mean to drop this where Peleg is bound to come across it, while we watch and see what he does. Are you game for that?"

Rob scratched his head, and made a grimace.

"It does seem sort of cruel, to tell you the truth," he said, presently; "but, after all, good may come of it. As I said before, better know the worst at once, and then either get rid of Peleg, or else beg his pardon for suspecting him

of being a thief. Yes, I'll go you in the game, Ralph. I know your intentions are of the right sort."

They shook hands on that. Then Ralph proceeded to bait the trap by dropping the pocket-book in plain sight, where he said he knew Peleg Pinder would soon be passing while carrying out his usual duties, which had to be attended to with clock-like fidelity on that farm where everything was run on schedule plans.

"I've baited many a trap for wild animals before this," Ralph further remarked, with a shrug of his shoulders that told of the dislike he had for the job, "but this is the first time I ever set one for a human being. I hope it'll be the last one. I don't fancy doing it at all."

So they concealed themselves in a convenient place nearby, where their presence would never be suspected, and then waited to see what would happen. Just as Ralph had figured, Peleg hove in sight within ten minutes. He was carrying two buckets of something for the young pigs that had to be fed so many times a day in order to cause them to grow fast.

He came to a sudden pause, and the buckets were set down violently. Another second and Ralph gripped Rob's shoulder as they saw the hired boy pounce upon the pocketbook with just the eagerness any one might have shown.

It was a tense moment. Even Rob admitted that he held his breath while wondering what Peleg would do with his find. They saw him look around, as though wondering whether any one had noticed him pick it up. Rob almost feared that the boy would hasten to conceal the pocketbook in his shirt, which would be pretty positive evidence that he was tempted to keep it.

Then he saw Peleg draw a long breath. Leaving the two buckets standing there, the boy started on a run for the barns.

"Now what's he up to?" ventured Ralph, staring after the runner in dismay.

"Isn't your father out there doing something?" asked Rob, giving Peleg the benefit of the doubt.

"That's a fact, he is," admitted the other. "I wonder if Peleg means to hand him over my pocketbook. I forgot to tell you that he must

know I'm the owner, because it's of a peculiar pattern, and he has seen me handle it many times."

"We'll stay here a bit until the coast is clear, and then investigate, if that suits you, Ralph."

After a brief interval Peleg came back again and carried off the two buckets of swill for the pigs. He did not look at all ruffled, or act as if he had any weighty secret on his mind, from which Rob took heart, and believed the boy had done the square thing.

"Shall we look your father up now?" asked Rob, presently, when things had settled down again to their accustomed calm.

"I suppose so," his companion replied, "but I'm feeling a little shaky, to tell you the truth, Rob."

"Well, I'm not," said the scout leader. "One thing about it, Ralph, you don't want your father to know you had deliberately dropped your pocketbook so as to test Peleg, do you?"

"By no means," answered Ralph, hastily. "I understand what you're aiming at, too. So I'll make out that I've missed my pocketbook and have come out to see if I dropped it about the

barns this morning. Kind of mean to act that way; but you understand that I want to keep it from dad. If I've made a mistake about Peleg, it would be too bad to get him down on the boy."

Sauntering around the big barns, they presently found Mr. Jeffords busily engaged in mending some harness, a task he always took upon himself, as he was quite expert along those lines. He glanced up and smiled at their approach. Ralph forced a halfway anxious look upon his face.

"Seen anything of my pocketbook, dad?" he asked.

For answer the other took it out of a rack above his head.

"Peleg brought it to me a short time ago; said he had come upon it on the path, and guessed it was yours, because no one else had a pocket-book just like it. Better be a little more careful, son, of your money; it doesn't grow on bushes, you know," and, having thus duly admonished his boy after the manner of parents generally, Mr. Jeffords forgot all about the circum-

stance and commenced speaking of something else.

Rob was satisfied that the little scheme was turning out just as he hoped, and that Peleg had not even been tempted to keep his find. He still felt a little anxiety in connection with the outcome, and soon gave Ralph a signal that they had better withdraw to a spot where the contents of the pocketbook could be examined.

This was easily managed, and soon afterwards the two boys entered Ralph's den at the barn, where they could have all the privacy they wished. It was with considerable interest that Rob saw the other take out his pocketbook, and his fingers, trembling with eagerness, commence to handle the wad of bills.

"Well, how about it?" asked the scout leader, as Ralph looked up; but really he need hardly have plied the question, for a burning color had rushed across the other's face, as though he felt conscious of having wronged the one who was under suspicion.

"It was just eleven dollars, I said, didn't I, Rob? That amount is here to a fraction, and I

guess Peleg never even opened the pocketbook, after all, but hurried as fast as he could to hand it over to dad. Well, I'm glad, and at the same time sorry that I did it."

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN

ROB felt something like relief, for although still strong in his belief that Peleg was innocent of the charge hovering over his head, he had felt a little anxious.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Ralph," he remarked. "A thing like this makes a good impression. Peleg has acted like any honest boy would."

"Y—es, it would seem so," the other went on to say, with a touch of hesitation in his speech. "I was just wondering if there could be a method in his madness. You see, for anything we know, he may have suspected that the pocketbook had been purposely dropped as a trap; or even seen us hiding where we did, and on that account guessed what was doing."

"That thought never came to me," Rob replied, looking grave. "While there's a chance

that it might be so, I don't believe it, Ralph. I think you gave him a severe test, and that the boy came out of it without being scorched a whit. Still, if you have the least doubt left, and I can't blame you for it, either, keep tabs of Peleg, and prove the case, one way or the other."

"Oh! I mean to, Rob. I don't consider it's quite fair to keep suspecting a fellow and never openly accuse him. I own up this affair has upset some of my opinions. I'm more inclined than ever to believe I was mistaken."

"Let's forget it for the present," suggested Rob.

To this the other only too readily agreed, for Ralph was evidently a fair minded fellow, who believed in the good old motto of "live, and let live."

Supper was to be at an unusually early hour because they meant to start to town afterwards. The Southern "mammy" who served as cook evidently knew how to serve up "turtle fries" to equal anything a Delmonico could boast; at least, that was the verdict of the boys after they had tasted the dish set before them.

It was noticed, however, that Tubby, the provider of the leading article on the bill of fare, did not seem to care particularly for turtle; which seemed strange to some of the others, knowing his customary tastes as they did.

"What ails you, Tubby?" demanded Sim. "Seems to me you only toy with that helping on your plate. If you love frogs' legs, and such things as spring chicken, you ought to just smack your lips over such a dish as this, fit for a crowned head."

Tubby grinned as he went on to reply.

"Oh! I don't know, Sim, why it doesn't seem to strike me just right. Somehow, I seem to don't care for it as much as I thought I would."

"Why, it is the finest thing going," urged Sim, "and here you act as if you thought it would jump right out of your plate at you!"

"Please don't say anything more, Sim," requested Tubby, looking a bit pale. So the subject was dropped, though Tubby failed to take another bite of his portion of "turtle fry."

Rob had noticed how white the fat boy had suddenly turned while Sim was teasing him. He

immediately guessed what was the matter. He afterwards found out, just as he suspected, that Tubby, wanting to see how everything was done, had stood around on the previous evening when Peleg carved the turtle into bits, after first removing the double shell, always a difficult task.

As Rob well knew, there is often a strange species of muscle contraction observed in the severed portions of a turtle or tortoise when recently killed, so that even pieces of the meat on the block will jump in a most peculiar way. Tubby, doubtless, witnessed with amazement this phenomenon as it was pointed out to him by Peleg, and somehow the remembrance had taken away his desire to feast upon the unlucky owner of the shell.

However, his normal appetite seemed to come back when the heaping plate of well-browned bass came on, for, taken in all, Tubby kept up with the others in disposing of the second course.

It was just after supper, while the boys were sitting around on the big porch resting a while before thinking of starting for town, that Peleg appeared. He approached the spot where it hap-

pened Ralph and Rob were idly moving back and forth in one of those wide porch swings.

"I wanted to ask you, Ralph, if you had any room in the car tonight to let me squeeze in, 'cause I happen to have some business to look after in town that ought to be 'tended to. You see, I got a letter when the delivery man went through this mornin' that says I had ought to see a lawyer in Wyoming right away concerning somethin' that I'll tell you 'bout later on."

Ralph nodded his head as though it would be quite agreeable to him.

"Sure, Peleg, plenty of room," he replied. "Car will hold seven without crowding, and with you there will be only six. We'll be starting in about fifteen minutes, so if you haven't had supper, better be getting busy."

Afterwards he turned toward Rob and remarked:

"Queer thing for Peleg to want to go into town at night; but then he's a pretty busy fellow all day long. I wonder if he did get a letter this afternoon when the rural delivery mail man came along in his buggy?"

"I saw him reading some sort of letter half an hour ago, so I imagine he did," Rob told him, and the subject was dropped.

The patrol leader had noticed, however, that Peleg looked flushed more than ordinarily at the time he asked permission to accompany them to town. From this fact he imagined the boy had something on his mind. Perhaps that letter had been from the sister who was living in service some seven miles away in an opposite direction from Wyoming, and whom he did not often see. However, it was no business of his who Peleg corresponded with, and so Rob put the matter out of his mind.

Later on the four boys jumped into the big old car as Ralph drew up in front of the farmhouse. Peleg, too, was ready, and found a place on one of the extra movable seats. Rob again noticed that the boy seemed to be excited, though never speaking unless addressed. Several times he believed Peleg was chuckling to himself as if secretly pleased; but, then, a trip to town after nightfall might be a treat that excited his delight.

When they finally had covered the distance

separating the Jeffords' farm from Wyoming, and put the car up at a convenient garage where it could be called for at any hour of the night, Peleg said he guessed he would move along.

"We don't know just when we'll be starting back, Peleg," Ralph called after him; "but better show up here by eleven at the latest, or you might get left."

"Oh! I'll be along before that," confidently replied the other, as he hurried away down the street.

Sim was chuckling as though secretly amused.

"Now what has got hold of you, Sim, to keep making all those queer sounds like you do?" demanded Andy Bowles.

"Oh! nothing much," answered the disturber of the peace, "only I think I can see through a mill-stone when there's a hole in it. I was thinking about Peleg's asking to come with us. That letter business may have only been a blind. The real cause you can hear, if you listen right now."

"Why, it's a band playing, as you live!" ejaculated Tubby.

"To be sure," laughed Ralph. "I forgot that

this was the night the circus was billed to strike Wyoming. It's located on a vacant lot we have to pass going toward the centre of the town. Come along, let's stand around for a bit and see the sights. I always like to watch the shouters get busy, and see the crowd of country yahoos gathering around. We've got a whole hour yet before the concert begins, boys."

What wideawake boy could ever resist the alluring attraction of a circus band, with the added pleasure of listening to the various glib-tongued orators who so loudly describe the wonders to be seen in the side shows? Even Rob was perfectly willing to move along and join the crowd surging in front of the round-top that occupied the big vacant lot.

Many lights abounded, strange sounds came from beyond the canvas walls, and everything combined to throw an air of romantic interest about the one-night stand of the Great Aggregation that had honored Wyoming with its presence.

So the five boys stood and listened and laughed while the loud-voiced fakirs on the platforms bel-

lowed their invitations to "step in and see the seven wonders of the world," as shown in their side shows; while the busy ticket-taker in the circus wagon continued to sell pasteboard admissions to the big event, and people gradually sifted into the round-top for the evening performance.

"There's Peleg!" announced Sim, later on. "What did I tell you, fellows?"

Sure enough, Peleg was to be seen standing there, with a look of intense interest on his face, as though greatly amused by all this glitter and talk. The woman in spangles who handled an enormous snake so fearlessly had the crowd gaping with awe; the pigmies from the heart of Africa who sang such a quaint song and exhibited their war trophies excited great interest; and the giant and dwarf appearing side by side on another platform caused quite a stampede in that direction when they pretended to engage in a boxing match.

No wonder then that Peleg could not resist stopping on his way, and staring at those wonderful sights. It would be hard, indeed, to find any boy capable of passing by on the other side

of the street, no matter what his errand, without halting for at least a few minutes' survey and treat.

"But you notice that he isn't showing any signs of going inside, don't you?" Tubby was saying, turning to Sim. "Perhaps Peleg did have some other sort of errand in town, just as he said. Stopping on his way doesn't signify anything, for we're doing the same thing."

Still, Peleg was standing there when they once more resumed their stroll, that same entranced look on his freckled face; as though he may have utterly forgotten the passage of time, and the fact of his having business to attend to in this unexpected treat of being brought in touch with a traveling circus.

Ralph had several things he wanted his friends to see while in town. Of course, they might be trivial sights to these scouts, some of whom had actually been across the ocean; traveled to Mexico, and visited at the great Panama-Pacific Exposition on the Coast; but, then, like most boys, he felt that it was up to him to do the honors to the best of his ability.

So Rob and the others looked upon the high school with its campus; heard about the doings of the football team, and the baseball nine that represented Wyoming in the league; were shown the various mills and factories upon which the stability of Wyoming rested; and, finally, along toward half-past seven, they started for the hall where the concert was to be given, and which happened to be in the centre of the town.

Rob noticed that quite a lively wind had arisen. Some of the boys remarked that they were glad they had thought to "chuck" their sweaters in the car, for with such a high breeze in their faces they would need them going home at a late hour. Mention is made of this because it afterwards turned out that this same strong wind had much to do with the fortunes of Wyoming before another day dawned.

As they passed along the main street of the town Rob saw Ralph pointing to what seemed to be an abandoned frame building that had once been a bustling hive of industry, though now deserted. It stood as a connecting link between the old part of the town and the newer sec-

tion where all those factories and mills lay.

“Going to be pulled down soon, and another big mill built there,” Ralph remarked, and then he added, turning to Rob: “Look, Rob, there’s Peleg now, and going in that place!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE RISING WIND

"THEN he didn't go to the circus, after all," remarked Tubby, as though that one thought occupied his mind; truth to tell, had the stout scout been given his own choice in the matter, he might have preferred seeing the acrobats and the tight-rope walkers under the big round-top, rather than listen to the warblings of those who were to take part in the concert.

"He seems to hesitate and look around him," said Rob, meaningly, to Ralph Jeffords. "What sort of a building is that, anyhow? It looks as though it might be given up to offices and shops."

"Just what the Handy Building is," explained Ralph. "There are a lot of different business people represented there. Some people call it the Arcade Building. You can see plenty of lights there, for most of the offices keep open till ten

o'clock at night. Among others I might mention who occupy space in there, Rob, is one Hardman, a curio dealer. I've been in his rooms lots of times when I had some money I felt like investing in old coins and foreign postage stamps for my collection."

"Stamps!"

Rob only repeated the word after the other, but there was a world of meaning connected with the way he did it. Like a flash there came to him the remembrance of the loss Ralph had claimed to have suffered, when he failed to discover the several packets of valuable stamps where he believed he had left them, ready for mailing back to a city dealer from whom he had received them for making selections.

Could it be possible that Peleg had yielded to some sudden temptation, and purloined those packets? Was his errand to Wyoming really to dispose of the stamps, after he had taken them from the sheets to which they had been slenderly attached?

Rob was conscious of a chilly feeling around the region of his heart as he continued to watch

the boy standing there. It was not difficult to imagine Peleg battling with the strong temptation. That might account for his looking dubiously up at the building, and hesitating before taking a fatal step in wrong-doing.

"Well, he's gone in!" said Sim, presently. "I guess Peleg really had some business in town, and didn't mean to go to the show. I c'n see that all sorts of people have offices in that building, lawyers, doctors and even a curio dealer. Do we go on now, Ralph, or are you meaning to wait for Peleg?"

"Oh! we're going on, all right, Sim; Peleg said nothing about wanting to attend the entertainment. Perhaps, after he's through with his *important business* here he may drift back to the circus lot. That would be more in his line, I guess. Come on."

"What were those packets of stamps worth, Ralph?" Rob managed to ask without being overheard by any of the others, for Tubby and Andy chanced to be engaged in a little dispute concerning something that had arisen, as with Sim they trudged along ten feet or so in the rear.

"Something like fifteen dollars, I should say," replied the other, gloomily.

Rob knew that it was not so much the value of the missing packets that bothered Ralph Jeffords as the fact that a boy to whom his father had been so kind had apparently betrayed a trust, and stolen from the son of his benefactor.

"And you think Peleg has been pretty keen on making money, do you?" continued the scout leader.

"Yes, that's a fact," he was told, moodily. "I never knew a fellow more eager to scrape cents and dollars together. He would do any kind of extra work after hours if only he could make ten cents by it."

"But you wouldn't call him a money-lover, or a miser, would you?" queried Rob.

"That was what I thought at first, and I didn't like it one bit," Ralph explained, frankly. "So I mentioned the matter to Peleg one time. He told me that he was the oldest of the children left by his father when he died. One sister just younger than Peleg works for a family not a great many miles away from here. The others,

three of them, are in an orphan asylum, you know. Well, would you believe it, Peleg told me he had an ambition to get enough money together, somehow, to sooner or later have an humble home, where all the Pinder children might live together!"

Rob caught his breath.

"That was a noble resolution for Peleg, wasn't it?" he exclaimed.

"I believed so," replied Ralph, disconsolately. "It made me think a heap of the boy, and I tried every way I could to encourage him. That's what makes it cut me so hard now, to suspect that he could steal from me."

Somehow, what he had heard seemed to encourage Rob more than ever in his belief that Peleg must be innocent. The circumstances all seemed to point strongly toward his being guilty; but Rob plucked up fresh hope after learning what a splendid excuse the boy had given for scrimping, and saving every cent he could gather together.

In imagination Rob could even see the happy faces of the little Pinders when they eventually

found themselves under a roof of their own, if such happiness was indeed ever going to come their way. Brave, loyal, brotherly Peleg, how few boys would have dreamed such dreams as came to him at night, and visions by day?

"Oh! it doesn't seem possible that he could be guilty of doing such a mean thing as taking your stamps, Ralph," he told the other.

Somehow, even the confidence Rob had in the boy who was under suspicion seemed to make Ralph Jeffords feel better.

"Your saying that does you credit, Rob," he told his new friend; "and because of the faith you seem to feel in him, I'm going to try again and believe Peleg innocent. But, all the same, that won't prevent me from finding out the truth."

"No, you owe that much to Peleg," admitted Rob. "One way or the other, you've got to learn the answer to this puzzle. How will you go about it?"

"There's one way that might tell the story," confided Ralph. "I can come down to town tomorrow morning on some errand, and take occasion to drop in at the Arcade."

"You mean to see the curio dealer, and put a few questions to him; is that the programme, Ralph?"

"Yes. He knows me very well, and would keep my secret," continued the other, as he sighed heavily, evidently anticipating the worst. "I'd have the money with me to buy them back if Peleg did sell them, because I wouldn't want Mr. Hardman to have the boy arrested as a thief. That would leave it all in my hands. I'd have to consult my father before I decided what I finally ought to do in the matter."

"Well, something may happen between now and tomorrow to change your plans. For instance, you may even possibly discover the stamps somewhere. I've hidden things myself, and for a short time forgotten where I put them. Then somebody else may have taken them, not to steal them, it might be. Oh! there are lots of loopholes through which they could have passed. And after you've learned the truth you're surprised to find how easy it was to misjudge any one."

"But what else would take Peleg in there?"

"I confess I couldn't give even a guess," admitted the scout leader; "but he said there was some news in that letter he received that made him want to come to town. For all we know, it might have something to do with the sister who is in service, or even the three smaller children in the asylum. Poor Peleg has been dreaming of doing great things, you know, Ralph."

"You are certainly the grandest fellow to stand by any one who is down I ever met!"

"Oh! I don't know that I'm different from any scout who wears the khaki, and has taken the scout oath to try and be useful to others. You'd do just as much if you had the chance, and I know it, Ralph. But suppose we drop Peleg for the time being, and speak of something else? The other fellows must be wondering why we keep our heads together so long, and talk in undertones."

"I'm agreeable, Rob. Notice how the wind has commenced to rise. It was quiet when we left home, and now you can hear it rustling through the trees at a great rate. Do you think it's going to storm?"

"I don't happen to be the weather sharp of the troop," laughed Rob, "so you mustn't depend too much on my prediction."

He looked up at the sky, and then around him, after which he ventured to say:

"I think there will be quite a blow during the night, for those clouds are passing over in a hurry; but it isn't likely we'll have to go home in a rainstorm."

Apparently, the other trio must have also been paying attention to the rising wind, for just then Tubby called out:

"Hope you've got a gilt-edged fire department in your town, Ralph. If a fire *did* happen to break out tonight, with this breeze going, it would likely eat up a few of your buildings. How about it?"

"Why, we've got a pretty good fire department, such as you are apt to find in towns of this size," replied the other, seriously. "It's partly a volunteer one, of course, and they've got quite a few medals won in State rivalries, competing with other companies. Fact is, we're a bit proud of the Wyoming Fire Department. They

can smash windows faster, and get a hose up to a burning house five seconds quicker than the best of them."

All of the boys laughed at hearing Ralph say this.

"Whee!" exclaimed Tubby, "I wouldn't like to be under that old circus tent if a big storm did come swooping along. I guess it'd go flying over the mountain-tops like a kite."

"I was in a circus once when we had a terrific storm," admitted Ralph. "I'll never forget the way the frightened people behaved. The canvas flapped wildly, and made the most terrifying noises going. We expected to have the whole business come down about our ears any minute, but fortunately the wind passed over, and the animals quit howling so that the people could quiet the youngsters. It was something awful while it lasted."

"Are we going inside the hall now?" asked Andy, who had grown tired of walking around the town seeing the "sights"; for while these may have amounted to something in Ralph's estimation, they were very common in the eyes of fel-

lows who had done so much traveling, and had even seen considerable of the war in Europe, as well as the wonders of New York City.

"We might as well, because it's getting close to the time for the performance to begin," the guide replied.

There seemed to be a good many people all moving in the same general direction as themselves. These were, doubtless, the holders of tickets to the entertainment that had been the magnet drawing them to town on this particular night fated to be set down with a red mark in the history of Wyoming.

Presently they joined the line before the door of the hall in which the concert was to be held. Apparently it was bound to be a popular affair. Ralph privately informed his mates that most of the people were coming just to hear the little girl with the Patti-like voice. In this way he aroused their curiosity to a high pitch; though none of them claimed to be fine judges of operatic music, or able to decide the exact quality of a wonderful voice, still they knew good singing, and were considerably interested in what Ralph

had told them of the girl who was leading the printed programme as Anna Burgoyne.

"Her father was connected with the opera over across the water years ago," explained Ralph. "Her mother, too, used to sing in public, so you see Anna comes by her wonderful voice honestly. But just you wait and see, that's all."

They found the hall already well filled with an audience that counted as most of the people worth while in and around Wyoming; though the circus doubtless served to attract quite a crowd, as it always does.

CHAPTER XV

THE CLANG OF THE FIRE BELL

THE hall continued to fill up, until there was standing room only by the time the performance began. The boys were interested in the people around them, for Ralph was able to relate certain things of interest connected with some of those he pointed out.

All at once Tubby exclaimed:

"Well, we made a big mistake, after all, about him!"

"Who are you referring to, Tubby?" asked Sim, who sat next the fat scout.

"Why, just turn your head this way, and glance over yonder near the door among the late-comers. Strike you that you know anybody in that bunch?" chuckled Tubby.

"Say, it is Peleg, after all!" admitted Sim. "I was dead sure the circus would do for him, and

here he bobs up at the concert. Do you suppose it's because we just happened to be coming here, and he knew it, Ralph?"

Ralph and Rob had discovered the farm boy by then.

"Oh! I don't know about that," said the former, looking both surprised and puzzled. "I believe I've heard Peleg say more than once he liked music, and singing especially. That was when he told me one of his little sisters could warble like a bird, and some day she might show people the Pinders weren't such good-for-nothing trash, after all. That's what has been worrying Peleg all along, the way folks looked down on his father and the children after the mother died, years ago."

"Well, he looks as if he was glad to even find standing room tonight," suggested Andy. "You can see a regular grin on his face away from over here. Peleg certainly seems happier than I've known him to be since we first met him. It doesn't require much to please some fellows, I take it."

Rob looked at Ralph, and found the other ob-

serving him intently. Both of them were wondering whether the visit Peleg had made to the old curio dealer could account for that broad smile on his face. Indeed, an observer, if he had been a boy, would have said that Peleg every once in so often looked as though he wanted to "shake hands with himself," he felt so happy.

The announcement that the entertainment was about to commence drew the attention of the five lads from Peleg Pinder. When Tubby happened to glance in that quarter again later on, he could not place the other, for, the rear of the hall being densely packed with the late-comers, it was difficult to make out any individual person.

There were some ordinary numbers at first, a fair quartette that provoked a certain amount of applause, then a banjo solo that quite excited Tubby, who secretly aspired to some day to play such a splendid instrument.

After that some other exercises came along, but it was evident that the audiencé as a whole was waiting for the crowning event of the evening.

"Now she's coming, so get ready, fellows!"

said Andy Bowles, referring to his programme.

There was a little wait. Ralph craned his neck, looking around to nod to a number of people he knew; but Rob really believed the other was thinking of Peleg more than anything else just then. To prove this he whispered:

"Don't see anything of him, do you, Ralph?"

"That's a fact," came the ready reply; "he's lost in the shuffle, for there's a big mob back there, pushing to get inside the hall in time to hear Anna Burgoyne. I tell you she's getting folks up in this neck of the woods excited a heap. But you just wait and see, that's all."

Then there broke out a wild hand-clapping and stamping of feet. Rob saw a demure little girl standing there, blushing and bowing as she faced the big audience.

"Why, she's hardly more than a child?" gasped Tubby, as the noise gradually died away, with the singer standing there wholly at her ease.

"Well, she isn't thirteen yet," admitted Ralph, "which makes it all the more wonderful. Oh! she's a nightingale, all right, believe me. I think she's got the sweetest and strongest voice of any

one I ever heard, and, let me tell you, I've been down to New York and attended more than a few first class concerts, too."

Silence fell upon the crowd. Every eye was fastened on the demure little figure of Anna Burgoyne. Every one almost in that big hall had heard her sing time and again, but it seemed as though they could never get enough of her wonderful voice. Most of them believed like Ralph, that some fine day little Anna was bound to put Wyoming on the map through the marvelous voice Nature had given her. Already some of the rich men of the town had settled it among themselves that later on she must be sent to Europe, when the dreadful war was over, in order to have the highest artists of the Old World train her voice. Nothing was to be too good for Anna Burgoyne. Already they could in imagination see her charming the world of music lovers, and incidentally making the little Adirondack town of Wyoming known far and wide.

Rob understood that the child did have a most wonderful voice as soon as he heard her commence to sing. He, too, was thrilled with the

purity of her tones as well as by their sweetness and power. Of course, he knew that she was almost wholly untrained, but in time, unless something happened to injure her vocal chords, she would very likely fulfill all the predictions of her admiring Wyoming friends.

A storm of applause followed the completion of her selection, in which all of the boys heartily joined. Then came another song, and still a third. It seemed as if the audience had gone crazy over that mite of a girl, and would insist on her complying with their demands until she could no longer sing a note.

Finally, as the only way to still the tempest, the manager of the entertainment appeared on the stage to tell the cheering people that Anna Burgoyne would oblige them once more later on in the evening, since they would find her name there for further efforts.

"Well, what do you think now?" asked Ralph, glowing with pride over the achievement of the town pet.

"She's bound to make a name for herself, all right," admitted Rob.

"I never heard anything like it," said Tubby, looking so pleased that his cheeks stuck out like twin rosy apples. "Why, I could sit for hours and hear that girl sing. She's certainly a wonder, Ralph."

"I don't see how they can bear to let her go away to Europe," observed Andy, whom Rob had actually seen slyly wipe his eyes with the back of his hand while the singer was in the midst of a pathetic little ballad.

"Say, just listen to that wind making things hum outside, will you?" practical Sim was saying about that time. "I do believe it's growing worse right along. I hope it doesn't blow us into a ditch when we're heading for home. That old carryall of yours is big enough to catch the wind full smack, Ralph."

"Don't worry about that, Sim," retorted the other. "I've been in all sorts of weather with that auto, and she stands up before it like everything. Chances are five to one we'll get back home safe and sound. I only hope you will all feel that it's paid you to come in with me."

"Oh! that goes without saying, Ralph. We've

had a bully time already; and there's going to be more of that singing, you know," Tubby assured him. "There's Peleg now, sitting up on that railing back of the hall, along with some other fellows. Not a bad place to be in, because no tall woman with a head of hair as big as a bushel basket can intercept your view of the stage."

Tubby had the wisdom to lower his voice to a whisper while saying the latter part of this, because the lady to whom he evidently referred was apt to hear him unless he exercised great care; and one glimpse Tubby had had of her determined face had made him decide that he had better not excite her ire if he knew what was good for his health.

Rob looked and could also see Peleg. The Pinder boy seemed to be enjoying his evening at the entertainment hugely, for his face was still wreathed in smiles. Apparently his trip to town had been of a satisfactory nature, Rob thought.

The second half of the affair now started in, and once more the audience listened to what the programme provided. Though they applauded

everything, it could easily be seen that they knew just when to stop in order not to induce any of the other local performers to believe the hand-clapping was meant as an encore.

Finally there was Anna Burgoyne again, bowing, while a storm of sounds arose so that for several minutes she was utterly unable to proceed. When this had gone on long enough, according to the manager, he must have made some motion which the girl had been awaiting.

The lady at the piano struck a chord, and as if by magic all that hand-clapping and stamping ceased. The change was simply marvelous, and, save for the clear notes of the instrument, and perhaps the rattling of a few windows under the influence of the unruly wind, silence had fallen upon the big hall.

Then the girl commenced to sing again. Rob liked her voice better than ever, now that he heard it under different conditions. He was glad he had been asked to come to town by Ralph; glad of the opportunity to hear such splendid music, and find himself face to face with such a little song witch.

Hardly had the last note died away than they gave her a whirlwind of approbation. Why, the very floor seemed to quiver under the thunder of sound; and all intended to inform that slender slip of a girl how much they thought of her vocal efforts. Surely there was only one Anna Burgoyne, and she belonged to Wyoming in the Adirondacks.

Then, in time, they allowed her to sing to them again. If anything, this last song won their hearts more than all that had gone before. A third time she had to come from behind the scenes, for they would not allow the programme to proceed. This time she bowed, and smiled, and shook her head; but the same tumult broke out after she had gone.

"They act as though they could almost eat her up!" Tubby was saying, laughingly, all the while pounding his fat palms together, and making considerable addition to the general din.

After this had gone on for some time without any apparent sign of a break, once more the girl appeared, looking flushed and happy. She shook her head, and held up her hands as if to

beg them to have mercy on her. In spite of all, Rob believed she would be obliged to sing just once more, though he knew she must be tired from her exertions.

Something came about that changed things almost in a breath, something that caused the crowd gathered there to think of other things besides music and promising girl singer with a grand future before her.

Rob felt a sudden thrill pass through him as he caught a brazen note just when the tumult in the hall had died away, and the lady at the piano was beginning to strike up an accompaniment.

"Is that the fire alarm bell?" he asked Ralph, hastily.

"Yes, that's what!" exclaimed the other.

The sound must have struck a note of alarm at many hearts in that gathering, for they could easily guess how a fire, with such a gale blowing, might imperil the whole town. Men could be seen jumping hastily from their seats, possibly some of them volunteer firemen, whose duty called them to leave their beds or the banquet

hall when the call came, regardless of conditions or circumstances.

Their pushing through the crowd at the door was the signal for a rush; and in the excitement of that moment even the popular little Anna Burgoyne was temporarily forgotten in the desire to get outside the hall.

CHAPTER XVI

FIGHTING THE FLAMES

"HADN'T we better follow the crowd, and get out of here, Ralph?" asked Rob, when he found the sudden alarm of fire had broken up the entertainment, and that even little Anna Burgoyne had taken advantage of the diversion to slip back of the stage again.

"I suppose we might as well," grumbled Ralph, "because she's gone, and there won't be any more singing tonight."

The five boys started toward the door, where quite a jam had occurred, as many of the excited audience tried to push through at the same time. In consequence there was a blockade, and it would take a long time for those in the rear to emerge from the hall.

"Too slow for me," ventured Andy. "Say, Ralph, couldn't we get out by way of one of these windows?"

"Let's look and see," added Sim.

Investigation proved the plan feasible. The ground was fourteen feet or so below them, but there was a shed of some sort, on to which roof they could readily pass from the window of the second-story hall.

Ralph led the way, because he belonged to Wyoming, and really the pilot of the party, chauffeur and all that. After him came Rob, while the other three followed in turn, Tubby, as usual, bringing up the rear with credit, and a superabundance of material.

"Careful you don't slip and slide off this shed roof," advised Ralph as he cautiously moved along, intending to hang from the lower end and drop to the ground.

Tubby came near having trouble when his feet slipped; but Andy managed to catch hold of the one in danger, and steadied him until he could get another footing. Then one by one they lowered themselves and dropped. Even Tubby succeeded in making a safe retreat from the building. People were still emerging by twos and threes from the exit of the hall as they hurried

past. Evidently they might have been kept shut up there for half an hour, losing much worth seeing, had they been content to accept things as they came, and never trying to escape by way of that window.

"Which way now?" bellowed Andy.

"Leave that to Ralph; he knows how the land lies!" Rob suggested.

"Yes, follow me, everybody!" the party indicated called over his shoulder.

Away they hastened along the street, where people were already hurrying in squads and singly, all heading in a certain direction as though word had been passed along the line concerning the location of the fire.

"You see, it's in the poorer section of the town," Ralph was telling Rob, as they ran along side by side. "There goes another fire engine; and I suppose the chemical crowd have already started work on the fire, because they can get going so much faster than the others. Listen to the shouting, will you? That sounds as if Wyoming had been waked up, I guess."

Rob was already alarmed, and with reason.

He could see from the glare in the heavens that the fire was dead ahead of them; indeed, several times they had glimpsed flames shooting madly upwards. Rob remembered that they were facing the wind almost head on, which would mean that the conflagration must be swept on its breath directly toward the mill and factory part of the town.

Great excitement reigned all around them, and this was growing more intense as each dozen seconds flitted past. People began to realize that an awful calamity actually threatened their fine little town, and that unless the firemen were unusually successful in confining the blaze to a few houses, there was a chance of a catastrophe that would wipe out the better part of the entire community, and render many families homeless, as well as depriving hundreds of their daily tasks if the mills and factories went up in smoke.

No doubt the fire department would do everything possible to save the town, but, after all, they were a feeble force to try and stand in the way of that leaping blaze when fanned and whipped by a furious wind.

The five boys had come in to attend an entertainment, but it began to look as if they might be on hand to witness a most distressing catastrophe. Rob was trying to think what they could do to help save the town, should the fire actually get beyond the frantic efforts of the few firemen with their feeble apparatus. He was only too willing to do anything that lay in his power to render assistance; but just then, despite his utmost efforts, no scheme appealed to him.

Many there were who would be glad to help as best they could; but it is disheartening to find how little can be done under such conditions. The fire had already taken such a fierce hold that the chances of successfully fighting it and saving the rest of the town seemed slim, indeed.

"There, they've got the water started on it!" called out Andy, who had sight that enabled him to see things other were less able to catch. "Two streams are getting busy, it seems. Good for those firemen; they know their business, all right. But, say, the flames just seem to laugh at all they can do. Look there the way they keep on shooting up like they were trying to lick the clouds!"

It was indeed an impressive sight. The fire demon was hard at work trying to defy all efforts at putting the flames down. By the red light of the conflagration the crowd that was quickly gathering, running this way and that in excitement, had a peculiar look to Rob, who likened them to Indians minus their feathers and other war paraphernalia.

"There, it's gone and done it now!" shrilled a boy nearby; "see, the lumber yard has caught fire. Gee! look at it going like soap, will you?"

It was only too true. Instead of the fire being stemmed, it appeared to be making giant strides, and extending right and left, as well as sweeping onward with that furious wind.

Already cries of terror were arising. Some of the people who chanced to live at the further end of the town beyond the mills and factories started on a run for their homes, doubtless with the one thought of getting as much of their household possessions to a place of safety as possible before the greedy flames swept a swathe of destruction across that region.

Rob had seen pictures representing a panic,

but here was the real thing. While some of the mob stood there and stared as though they did not mean to miss a single feature of the burning up of the town, others were wringing their hands and shrieking in terror as they ran this way and that, hardly knowing what they were about.

It was really difficult to talk while all these noises were going on. Rob had to place his lips quite close to the ear of Ralph when he spoke.

"The wind is carrying things before it, you see, Ralph!" he called out. "Unless I miss my guess, it's heading straight toward the mills."

"Just what it is," admitted the other, looking completely unnerved. "If there comes a sudden and lucky shift to that breeze it's good-bye to all of Wyoming—mills, dwelling houses and everything. You see, it's got something to feed on right along, from the cottages where it's working now, to the factories. It's eating its way just like a train of wet powder will do when you touch a match to the same, sizzling along until it reaches the end. And the worst of it is nothing can be done to halt its triumphant march, nothing that I can see."

It was plain that Ralph was disheartened by the prospect confronting the enterprising little town. He took a great interest in Wyoming, and the impending catastrophe appalled him.

"Isn't there something we could do to help these poor people get their stuff out of reach of the flames, even if we can't stop the fire raging?" asked Tubby, whose tender heart was always ready to bleed for any sufferer, no matter what his race, color or condition.

There were wagons backing up to the pavements, and people hurriedly making trips back and forth between the houses and the curb, carrying what they treasured most in their limited possessions. It was a most pitiable sight, and one those boys were not likely to forget for a long time.

The idea took hold of them, and they started to work, lending a helping hand to a number of the panic-stricken families along the street. Meanwhile the fire was eating its way gradually along. Rob tried to figure how long at this rate of progress it would take for it to jump across to the other side of the town, and start

devouring those splendid mills, and the machine shops, where scores and hundreds of people were accustomed to earn their daily wage.

"An hour at the most, and it will be good-night to the place, perhaps in a whole not less time than that," he told himself; and there was something akin to awe in the thought that man appeared to be so utterly helpless to engage in a combat with the allied elements of wind and fire, once they took the bits in their teeth, and started to destroy all in their path.

Even where the boys were working so like beavers they could hear the angry snap and crackle of the leaping flames. To Rob it seemed as though they were actually laughing in derision at the futility of the crafty brain of man to stay their onward progress.

If he could only devise some way to beat them at their own game—how Rob cudgeled his wits to try and think of some such scheme, but somehow the things that appealed to him seemed so silly and foolish when pitted against such a roaring windswept mass of raging fire.

Rob had seen a forest ablaze, and knew more

or less how the men who watch the Government-owned lands are taught to act when face to face with such a calamity. But the tactics that might be successful under such conditions were useless here in town. It was folly to dream of digging a trench over which the fire could not pass; and equally useless to think of starting a small fire ahead that could be controlled, so that when the main conflagration came to such a point it would find nothing to feed upon.

All this went on while the boys were working as hard as they could. Wherever they found a chance to lend a hand they pitched in with their accustomed vim; more than a few poor families had occasion to remember those sturdy and accommodating young fellows wearing the khaki uniforms, who assisted them to load the wagons, and then get a flying start for a point of safety.

Rob was beginning to feel a sense of despair as he wrestled in vain with the perplexing problem of how to successfully fight that volume of flame eating its way remorselessly toward the section of the town where so much of the community's prosperity was laid up.

Then, like an inspiration, something came to him. It almost took his breath away, such was the wonderful nature of the idea. It was no new invention of his, but something he remembered reading when a city had been threatened with destruction, and the resourceful fire fighters were compelled to take stern measures in order to check the onrushing flames.

He looked around. Ralph fortunately was not far away, staggering under a trunk belonging to some poor woman who had been given a chance to place it upon a partly loaded wagon. Rob ran in that direction. His appearance before Ralph gave the other a new thrill, for he immediately saw from the excited look on the scout leader's earnest face that Rob had struck a feasible idea at last.

"I've got it!" cried Rob, as he seized upon the other; "come with me as fast as you can, and as we run I'll tell you my plan. It's a desperate chance, but with the help of Heaven we may save the town yet," and so they started off as fast as their already tired condition would allow.

CHAPTER XVII

A WILD RACE AGAINST TIME

THE two boys had hardly made a start when they found Sim, Andy, and even Tubby trotting along at their side, and naturally overwhelmed with astonishment at the singular action of the pair.

"Hey! what's all this mean?" cried Sim.

"Where are you heading for?" exclaimed Andy; while Tubby was gasping:

"My stars! is it as bad as *this*, and do we have to run for our lives? Will the mills blow up like magazines, Rob, and send everything sky-high?"

"Listen!" snapped Ralph. "Rob here's got a scheme. He's asked me to go along with him and help out. Now tell us, Rob, what it's all about?"

"We must get the car out, you and I, Ralph, and make for your place like the wind. Don't

you understand, it's that dynamite your father's got stored there, together with the battery for exploding the same, that we've got to have."

"What, dynamite? Haven't we got fire enough as it is without trying to blow up the poor old town?" cried the amazed Andy.

"You don't get on to my meaning," pursued Rob, feverishly. "If we only get back in time to make use of the stuff, we could shut off the fire from the other section of the town, where all the mills and workshops are."

Ralph gave a whoop. Evidently something like the truth must have flashed athwart his active mind.

"Oh! Rob, you've got that old abandoned building in mind, haven't you?" he demanded in turn, with a note of exultation in his voice.

"Nothing else," came the incisive reply, as all of them continued to run on.

"To blow it up would leave a gap, wouldn't it?" continued Ralph.

"Just what I'd expect to make by destroying that long rambling building," Rob explained. "If any fire jumped across after that, we could take

care of it; but the main lot would be held in check at the gap. That's what they sometimes do when a great fire is raging in a big city. It is the last resort of desperation."

"I like the scheme!" declared Sim, instantly.

"It sounds good to me!" added Andy.

Tubby, too, may have had an opinion, but he was not given a chance to express it, for just then they arrived at the garage where the big car had been left.

"Don't lose a second if you can help it, Ralph!" called out Rob.

"You bet I won't, Rob!" snapped the other, as he made a rush in the quarter where he could see the car standing waiting for them.

"Have the headlights on, too, because we want to make fast time, and can't take chances of an accident!" called out the scout leader.

"How about us, Rob?" asked Sim.

"You three fellows will have to stay here and wait for us," came the order, and Sim, knowing that Rob always meant what he said, and was moreover the head of the Eagle Patrol, did not attempt to dispute his word.

They were keenly disappointed, for nothing would have pleased Sim and Andy more than to accompany the others in their mad flight out to the distant farmhouse, some ten miles away, to fetch back the explosives that might yet save the better part of the apparently doomed town.

Again Tubby said nothing. He would have gone had it appeared to be a part of his duty. Tubby was not "hankering" after such a furious race against time. Besides, what would be the need of five trying to do what two could just as well accomplish? Tubby could show a streak of discretion occasionally, it seemed. Then, again, it would be hard to tear away from that scene of tremendous excitement, the like of which none of them had ever seen before.

Ralph was very much excited, and this may have interfered a little with his efforts to get the car out of the garage in the least possible time. Still, he managed fairly well, though Rob was counting the seconds as never before, with all that riotous noise ringing in his ears, and calling for speedy action.

Presently the car came swinging into sight,

with Ralph at the wheel. Rob made a flying leap and was quickly alongside the driver.

"Now hit it up for home, licketty-split, Ralph!" he called out as he fell back upon his seat in front.

"Good-bye, and good luck, fellows!" cried Tubby, warmly.

"Don't meet with any accident, whatever you do!" added Sim, for the loss of the whole town did not count one-quarter so much in his estimation as would an injury to his beloved chum, Rob.

Then, with a series of loud snorts, very much after the style of a horse under whip and spurs, the big car darted away.

At first Ralph had to go comparatively slow, because of the fact that there were many people on the roads, scurrying this way and that, some of them bearing treasures in their arms snatched from household effects, under the impetus of their lively fears. Wagons and other vehicles too were encountered, but Ralph, being a clever driver, managed to swing around these.

He also kept punching the siren and making a series of staccato sounds such as you can hear whenever an ambulance, or the vehicle of a fire-

chief dashes through the streets of your city or town in a sudden emergency.

So as a rule they were given a pretty decent right of way. People brushed aside even while not able to understand what right this car had to the road. Possibly it was accepted as an explanation that perhaps they were speeding for the next town to engage the fire department in the effort to save poor Wyoming.

Behind them lay the burning town. Rob looked back once and shuddered at what he saw, nor could he ever dismiss it wholly from his mind. Often in future nights, as he sat looking into a sparkling campfire, he would again see in imagination Wyoming burning, with the flames shooting high in the air, and myriads of flying sparks making it seem like a grand Fourth of July fireworks.

He bent all his energies to the task of peering ahead, and assisting the chauffeur keep track of the road, in which they were likely to meet some sort of obstacle at almost any moment.

"Seems pretty clear just now!" Rob ventured to say as they fairly flew along at the rate of al-

most a mile a minute, the old car doing nobly when Ralph turned on every particle of power.

"Yes, it is, but we're apt to meet a wagon coming to market any old time!" the other shot back at him, never taking his eyes from the road ahead even for a second.

Rob understood. He knew that farmers coming to sell their produce or hay in the local markets were likely to start away from home during the night so as to be in the square before peep of dawn. Yes, there was always a chance that they would meet one or more of these "hay-seeds," as Sim always called the honest tillers of the soil, perhaps asleep on his load; though such a thing was hardly possible with all that brilliant illumination in the sky, as though the world were coming to an end; and, besides, the muttering roar that sounded like a battle, Rob thought.

The headlights were none too brilliant, though answering ordinary purposes. Rob could have wished they were twice as strong, since that would have given a longer range, and they could distinguish any vehicle on the road much further away.

Around certain bends in the road they swung with a vehemence that almost took Rob's breath away. He had told Ralph to make the utmost speed, and the other was taking his words literally. Several times Rob almost thought they would skid, and bring up in a heap; but owing partly to good luck as well as Ralph's superior knowledge of the pilot's duties, they always managed to avoid this particular disaster.

It was utterly impossible for Rob to count the passage of time. He was aware of the fact that it would take them at least twelve minutes, perhaps more, to make the trip, even when going at this mad pace. Counting the same back, and a short delay while securing the dynamite and the battery, it must be something like half an hour that they would be away from town.

He wondered whether that would seal the doom of Wyoming. The fire was being urged on with feverish haste by that compelling wind, and it was only a question of so much time before it reached the connecting link between the mill part of the town and that section where the conflagration already raged.

Well, they would do all in their power to carry out their plan; if they failed, in spite of everything, no blame could be attached to them. A scout need not reproach himself if he has conscientiously done his duty; the rest has to be left to a higher power than his will.

"Look out! I see something ahead!" suddenly snapped Rob, as they turned a bend, mostly on two wheels.

Ralph slowed down instantly. At the same time he sounded the Klaxon, and veered more or less to one side of the road.

It turned out to be a market wagon belonging to some "trucker" who was making for town in order to dispose of his vegetables, fresh eggs, and fowls. He gave them at least half of the road, and they whirled past. Before they reached him they heard his voice raised to a bellow in which wonder and alarm predominated.

"Hey! what's that red light in the sky mean, Mister?"

"Wyoming is all afire!" Rob shouted back; and no doubt his words caused the man to experience a sensation akin to fright.

So they kept flying along. It was a weird ride, as remarkable as any one could possibly experience, and the attending conditions added to its strangeness.

The next obstacle happened to be a load of hay. Here they were delayed for as much as half a precious minute of time in getting safely by, since the wagon took up so much of the road. Ralph again proved himself to be the right party at the wheel, for he finally managed to negotiate the passage without an upset.

Where there were straight stretches Ralph made fearful time. No contestant in the Vanderbilt Cup Race could have done much better, Rob thought, as he held his hat with one hand, and strove to see ahead.

All the while he knew what desperate chances they were taking, since this old car was not built for a racing machine. At any moment some weak part might give way, and—well, Rob did not like to even think what the result was bound to be if such a thing came to pass. At least, they would never know what hit them, and there was a little grim consolation about that.

The road was unfamiliar to the visitor, but Ralph knew it like a book; and while he had to keep his eyes fixed ahead, at the same time familiar turns continually told him just what section they had reached.

"Halfway there!" he called out at one time, and Rob drew a long breath of satisfaction, for it meant that they had done a fair portion of the course without meeting with any accident.

"Three-quarters there!" Ralph again told him shortly afterwards; indeed, to Rob, it seemed as though two minutes had hardly elapsed, and yet more than a brace of miles must have been covered during the interval.

"I can see lights ahead that look as if they came from a house, Ralph!" he suddenly burst out with.

"Sure thing! That's our place!" the other announced.

Still, on they rushed, and presently Ralph cut down the speed.

"Here we are, safe and sound, Rob!" he exclaimed, as he turned in at the lane.

CHAPTER XVIII

BACK TO THE BURNING TOWN

RALPH was now on very familiar ground. Every foot of territory was so well known to him that he could perhaps have gone over it with his eyes blindfolded.

Some one came out with a lantern. It was Mr. Jeffords, who must have been considerably exercised after discovering that amazing glow in the heavens above Wyoming.

"What's happened?" he called out, as he ran toward the spot where the two boys were springing from the car, "and where is the rest of your crowd?"

"You tell him, Rob, while I run off to get some of that dynamite. Fortunately, I have a key to the little house where we keep it in stock. Give me my electric light from under the front seat, where I always carry it. All right, Rob, I'll be back in a rush!"

With that Ralph dashed madly away. Judge of the amazement of his father, who must by this time have begun to fear the world was awry, and that even his own boy had lost his mind in the mad turmoil.

"Tell me, what does it all mean, Rob?" he demanded, with quivering voice.

"The town's all afire, sir, and this wind is whipping the flames so that it begins to look as if everything would go," the boy told him, as he proceeded to get in the car. "I'm only going to turn around so as to save a minute of time. We must speed back there again as fast as we can make it."

"But why did you come out here?" questioned the puzzled farmer.

"To get some of your dynamite," Rob explained. "Don't you see, sir, there is a chance, by blowing up that old building standing between the mill section of Wyoming and the rest of the place, we can make a breach, and keep the fire from getting across to the factories and mills."

"A clever scheme, and I warrant that it came

out of your head, Rob Blake!" exclaimed the other, in admiration.

"Never mind about that, sir. It is the last desperate resort in a city fire that is being spread by a high wind. If only we can get back in time, I believe it may work."

"I'll go with you, Rob!" said the farmer, seized with the fascination of the thing. He immediately rushed toward the house to get a hat and coat.

Rob was sorry he had taken this stand. He hoped the old gentleman would not delay them in any way. Then, again, if an accident happened, it would be too bad to have him in the car.

Rob had taken the time before they left town, and he again consulted his little nickel watch. He could hardly believe his eyes when he found that twelve minutes only had elapsed since they said good-bye to Tubby and the other fellows. This meant that Ralph must have made tremendous time of it while racing madly along that country road. No wonder they had been jumped up and down continually, as they struck uneven places in the turnpike.

He kept looking off toward the spot where Ralph would be likely to come from. Could the other carry both the sticks of dynamite and the battery as well? Rob almost wished he had gone with him, and was thinking whether it was yet too late, when he heard a hail. Then came a flash of light, which he knew must be from that little hand electric torch they had found so useful when hunting the woods for the lost child, Caleb.

Just then Mr. Jeffords came along, much to Rob's relief. At least he would not delay them, which was one comfort.

"Please get in, sir, so we can be off in a hurry!" the scout leader remarked. As Mr. Jeffords realized the necessity for conserving every second of time in a great emergency such as now confronted them, he showed no evidence of being offended by this urging, but hastened to take his seat in the rear.

Rob was already in place, and Ralph came hurrying up. In his arms he carried quite a staggering amount of stuff, and was breathing hard from his exertions.

The battery and other things he stowed hastily

in the back of the car, where there was plenty of room. Then, getting aboard himself, for the engine was throbbing as though impatient to be given its head, Ralph made a quick start.

Presently they were again on the road, and heading toward town. The fiery heavens, now spread before them, added to the dreadful picture. It surely looked as though the last day had indeed arrived, when the world was about to go up in flames and smoke.

Mr. Jeffords would have liked to ask further questions, for his curiosity had been raised to the last notch; but the conditions hardly favored such a thing. They were speeding faster than he had ever gone in all his life. He had some difficulty in keeping his hat on. Moreover, every time he started to open his mouth the wind rushed down his throat and nearly choked him; so on the whole he wisely concluded to repress his desire to know more about the catastrophe that had befallen Wyoming.

As they drew nearer the town the wind brought to their ears some of the clamorous noises that were arising; and this in spite of the racket their

own fast speed created. With each wild swing around a bend the old gentleman doubtless imagined the end had come; but he was certainly game, and gave no evidence of any craven fear.

Rob was keeping a bright lookout for that hay-wagon again. He hoped the man upon learning that the town was afire would have switched off the main road, and started back home by another roundabout course. As they continued to fail to overtake the cumbersome object that almost filled the road, Rob's hope kept rising, and he finally decided that this was just what had happened.

Luck was with them in other ways. They not only negotiated the turns successfully, but, meeting several wagons coming out of Wyoming, they found that they were given the right of way, and more than half the road, thanks, no doubt, to the vigorous fashion in which Ralph tooted his shrill Klaxon almost constantly.

Drawing nearer town and the sounds began to be appalling. Mr. Jeffords must have been thrilled through and through by what he saw and heard. The flames could now be seen leaping up

as though exulting over their complete mastery of the works of man's hands. Rob was wondering and hoping and even praying in connection with their having drawn perilously close to that connecting link. Would they arrive in time, or had the fatal leap across already taken place?

With other sounds they could hear the roar of many voices. Doubtless, citizens had joined with the firemen in order to fight the flames, knowing that their fair town would be in complete ruins before morning if they did not manage in some fashion to get the mastery over the raging fire. Then, again, women and children must be shrieking, dogs barking, horses neighing, and every imaginable sound mingling to make that furious chorus.

It was hard now for Ralph to get along, because of the congestion. Thus, in spite of the warning Klaxon, they were detained several precious seconds while waiting for some wretched vehicle to get out of the way. Besides this there were children to be avoided, and all sorts of vexatious delays.

In spite of all, however, Roth felt sure they

had come back in record time. Unless his calculations were all awry, he believed they would not be too late to try out his suddenly conceived scheme to save Wyoming.

At one spot, as they were held up for a brief space of time, judge of Rob's surprise when Sim clambered into the car.

"Careful how you step on that dynamite!" warned Rob, at the same time hoping that Tubby and Andy might not also show up, and cause a threat of trouble.

It seemed, however, that Sim had been the only one able to break away from the entrancing scene of destruction and excitement. He had suddenly realized that the car would of necessity be compelled to come back the same way it went, and accordingly Sim had waylaid it on the border of the town.

When it was really unsafe to go any further, Ralph brought the car to a stop.

"We'd better get out here," he said, huskily, for somehow he seemed to still be out of breath from his exertions out at the farm.

"First thing," said Ralph, "I must find Mr.

Megrue, the Fire Chief. He'd be the only one to authorize the use of this stuff. Rob, you and Sim carry it with you over near the old factory building. I'll look for you there."

They had already discovered one thing that pleased them, which was that the fire had not as yet reached that connecting link. It was fearfully close, though, and if they hoped to try out Rob's brilliant scheme there must evidently be no time wasted.

Mr. Jeffords stuck by the pair. Apparently, he meant to see the thing through, and also that the boys got a square deal.

"Let me help carry something."

Ralph had had little time to gather a bunch of the terrible dynamite cartridges used for tearing stumps from the soil, and racking the earth ten feet deep in the new method of farming. They were in a little canvas bag just as he had apparently snatched them up in his haste.

"You can carry these, sir, if you will," said Rob, thrusting the small sack of explosives into the farmer's hands; "it's the dynamite, sir, you know."

"I'll make sure not to stumble, Rob, if that's what you're hinting at," replied the old gentleman farmer, as he carefully gathered his load in his arms, shielding it against all possible knocks and collisions.

They left the old car where it stood, though Rob had taken the trouble to shut off the engine before deserting it. For the present their whole attention must be concentrated upon something else. If their plans were successful, no doubt they would find the car again where they had abandoned it; and if the fire jumped the gap, in spite of all their efforts, why, then, it would be time enough to get the car out of danger.

Such sights as surrounded them they had never looked on before. People by this time had reached the border of a panic. Many were mad with fright, and their cries added to the confusion. Women and men were dragging children after them, sometimes also loaded down with stuff they wished to save, though often it seemed to be mere trash, such as a metal wash-tub filled with cheap kitchen utensils.

Rob was reminded of a comical description he

had once read of a fire, and what absurd things some people do under the stress of excitement, throwing glass and delicate things out of the window, and trotting down the stairs with a mattress. Still, none of them "cracked a smile" at the queer sights. Tragedy surrounded them, which would not allow of an expression of humor. There was nothing funny about a town burning down.

Just as Rob had anticipated, they found the other fellows in the vicinity of the deserted building that they meant to destroy, in hopes of staying the onward sweep of the flames. Andy and Tubby, remembering what their chums meant to do, had taken up their post close by, and anxiously counted the passing minutes, even while also observing the many strange sights that continually cropped up around them.

Tubby had read about Bedlam, and he wondered if it could "hold a candle" to the mingled noises surrounding them. He had listened to the crackling of flames before now, for Tubby had seen some pretty big fires both in the city and in the woods; but those in the past were not to

be compared with what he now experienced. While Tubby was standing there, now resting on one foot, and again on the other, he heard Andy give a whoop of delight, and, on turning, beheld the welcome face of Rob Blake, as well as that of Sim, and back of them the tall figure of Mr. Jeffords, all of them carrying something in their arms.

CHAPTER XIX

BEHIND THE BROKEN DOOR

"You got what you went after, then, didn't you, Rob?" asked Tubby, delighted to see the scout leader again.

They had gone off at such a furious pace that ever since Tubby had been anxious concerning their safety. While watching the advance of the devouring element, and the desperate efforts of the gallant firemen to try and throw some obstacles in the path of the flames, Tubby's thoughts would constantly go out toward the absent chums, with whose well being he was so greatly concerned.

"Yes, it's here along with us," Rob told him.

"But, say, what about Ralph?" demanded Andy, suddenly noticing that the party he mentioned was absent.

"He came back with us, all right," the scout leader replied. "Just now he's trying to find the

Chief of the Fire Department. You see, we couldn't start trying to blow up this building here without his consent."

"Land's sake alive! I hope they get here pretty quick, then!" ejaculated Tubby. "It's coming closer and closer right along. Andy and myself were getting ready to clear out of here when you showed up."

Rob had already noticed this for himself. His nervousness came back, only instead of a fear lest some accident happen to the speeding car, he now had something else to bother him.

They could feel the intense heat where they stood. Sparks fell all around them, endangering their eyes if they ventured to look upward.

"Better turn your coat collars up, fellows," advised Rob. "If you got one of these flying sparks down your back you wouldn't like it much."

"That's right," commented Andy, "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. Whew! just look at that cloud of sparks rise up! Must have been a building collapsed then to make the shower."

"But I don't see Ralph coming along yet."

complained Tubby, as he strained his eyes to stare down the street where the other must appear if he came at all.

There were plenty of people in sight, most of them onlookers who were fascinated by the dreadful picture presented by the roaring abyss of flames, though others were hard pressed firemen dragging their hose about in the endeavor to find some place where they might throw a stream into that old building just in the path of the oncoming flames.

Precious seconds were passing, Rob knew. He wondered whether he dared attempt to carry out his bold plan even without the consent of the Fire Chief. One thing certain, unless Mr. Megrue came along shortly, the last chance to attempt saving the mills would be lost. The fire was already close to the ruined building, and at any moment they might expect to see it burst into flames, for it must by now be getting frightfully hot.

Tubby gave a sudden cry, and was seen hurrying toward a wagon that, loaded with household goods, and drawn by a man and woman, both

foreigners, in place of a horse, had just passed them by. Something had fallen off the load; it sprawled there in the street, and lusty yells announced that it must be a fat baby.

Tubby picked it up and hastened to overtake the man and woman who were tugging so lustily between the shafts. Then, having given over the child into the charge of its mother, Tubby gallantly took hold himself, and started to assist the man draw his possessions further away from the grip of the fire demon.

That was just like Tubby, whose heart always beat in sympathy with any one in trouble. He would do without a meal in order to enjoy seeing a hungry dog devour what had been intended for his own consumption.

He did not intend going any great distance. After tugging for half a block at the load, he felt that he had done his duty. Besides, if Rob's plan worked as they hoped, this section of the town would be spared, and there was no absolute necessity for any one fleeing to a great distance.

So Tubby came back again, blowing like a por-

poise from his exertions. Ralph had not shown up yet, but Rob placed a hand affectionately on his shoulder and it needed nothing more to tell Tubby that his act had both been seen and appreciated at its true worth by the one whose good opinion he chiefly cared for.

"I believe they're coming, Rob!" Andy announced, greatly to the satisfaction of everybody.

It turned out that way, and almost immediately the others also discovered the figure of their companion hurrying towards them. At Ralph's side strode the tall form of a man wearing a glazed fire hat, and a coat that was supposed to be immune to sparks and flames.

"I guess that's Chief Megrue," remarked Mr. Jeffords, eagerly, "though his face is so black with the smoke and dirt his own wife wouldn't recognize him. Yes, I know his walk. Now we may see something done that will bring results. I was just about to suggest that you go ahead on your own hook, Rob, and I would stand for the consequences. Desperate cases require desperate remedies, you know. But there's no need of our doing that now, fortunately."

Ralph piloted his companion to the spot where the others awaited them. Undoubtedly he must have already found occasion to explain Rob's scheme to the head man of the local fire department. Mr. Megrue had been instantly seized with a conviction that it was indeed the only thing left to them, since all the puny efforts they had made to try and drown the fire out had been without avail.

Every fireman must know that such things are resorted to in all big city fires when the violence of the wind makes it impossible to head the flames off in any other way. Sometimes it turns out successfully; and then, again, there may be no tangible result, owing to circumstances over which even the use of explosives will have no control.

Rob saw with more or less pleasure that the Chief was a man of action, and not one of those old fogies sometimes connected with local companies, all "fuss and feathers," but lacking in the dash and valor that should distinguish every firefighter.

Perhaps had he known where he could put his

hand on a store of explosives, the Chief might before this have considered the possibility of blocking the flames by destroying that old connecting link of a building.

"He says it's the finest thing going!" called out Ralph, as he drew near where his father and the boys were waiting for him. "As I know how to handle the stuff, as well as the battery, he asks us to do the job. Rob, I want your help only. Come with me. The Chief will smash in the door for us, and we can plant the charge in a hurry. Then it only means running the wires out to some place here, and afterwards you can touch her off. That ought to be your privilege, Rob, because you thought up the scheme. Right along this way, Rob, please!"

Perhaps Sim and Andy, not to mention Tubby, might have liked very much to be given a part to play in the game; but their common sense told them there was no necessity for more entering the building than just those two, unless Chief Megrue chose to accompany the boys. At least, they could have the satisfaction of being present when the big affair came off, and watching that

ramshackle building collapse into kindling wood after the charge was fired.

The Chief fortunately had a fire ax with him. It may have been used to batter in the doors of many a building that had commenced to smoke, and give other positive signs of being about to burst into flames. Besides, it is always a useful tool in the hands of your country-town fireman, with which he loves to smash windows, and to make a grand show of accomplishing things.

Straight up to the door of the unused building the three of them hurried, the boys bearing the battery, the little cask containing the dynamite cartridges, and the coil of wire necessary to complete the outfit.

"The door is locked or barred!" shouted Sim, which remark told that he had, during the absence of Ralph and Rob, made a little private investigation on his own account, for it happened that Sim Jeffords was of a very inquiring nature.

This information saved the others from wasting any time trying to open the barrier. It also gave Mr. Megrue his clue, for, rushing directly up, he commenced to wield that ax of his in a

way that proved him to be a born fire-fighter.

With every blow Tubby and Andy and Sim gave vent to a whoop; which helped get rid of their extra enthusiasm, and also showed how they appreciated the work of the axman.

"Go to it, Chief!" shrilled Sim, excitedly. "That time the chips flew, I'm telling you! Give it another smash like that, and you'll see it go down. Wow! look at that crackerjack hit, will you, fellows? It's an extra stout door, all right, but just the same it's *got* to go! Once more to the breach everybody. So, there!"

The ax sank into the door, and ripped the panels up. Again did Mr. Megrue swing it back of him, and once more was that smashing sound heard, so pleasing to the ear of the listening and watching boys, who kept one eye on the little drama being played before them, and at the same time managed to observe the close approach of the sea of fire menacing the deserted factory.

Finally a shout from Sim announced that the door had been beaten open, and that the way into the building no longer held any obstacle to the advance of the trio.

They vanished from view, Fire Chief, Rob and Ralph. The three boys, together with Ralph's father, had to possess their souls in patience while waiting for the reappearance of the bold invaders. At any moment now they fully expected the building to burst into flames, so overheated must the dry woodwork have become. It was an anxious time for Mr. Jeffords, who had seen his son disappear beyond that broken door. At the same time he knew that Ralph was capable of thinking for himself, and also that he and Rob would not attempt any foolhardy feat just for the sake of "showing off."

There was a method in their madness in the present case. The welfare of the whole community hung in the balance, for if the fire could not be stayed by this master stroke of genius, then was Wyoming doomed; and the morrow's sun would rise upon the smoking ruins of the entire town.

Seconds passed, and changed into minutes. When it seemed as though something like two of these had drifted along, every one was growing weak with apprehension. They had terrible

visions of some evil having overtaken those who had gone into the building. It was old, and the floors almost in ruins, so that there was even a possibility that the venturesome ones had fallen through some unnoticed gap. Then, again, how were they to tell if some sort of insidious gas had gripped their chums, and rendered them helpless?

These were the kind of strange fancies that took possession of Sim Jeffords, always gifted with a lively imagination. He pictured Rob and his cousin lying there inside the old wreck of a factory, victims of a treacherous gas, and soon to be devoured by the oncoming flames.

Sim could stand it no longer. He must ascertain the truth, for it was always better to know the worst, according to his policy. He would rush forward and cautiously enter the building, groping his way through the smoke-filled interior, and calling out the names of his cousin and Rob.

Filled with this resolution, Sim had even commenced to approach the open door, paying no attention to the calls of his uncle from the rear,

when, to his great relief, he saw figures bursting out of the structure. They were Chief Megrue, Rob, the scout leader, and Ralph Jeffords.

CHAPTER XX

THE STRUGGLE TO SAVE THE TOWN

SIM counted the figures that came trooping out through the opening where the smashed door lay a wreck. When he found that none were missing, a great load seemed lifted from his heart.

"Hurrah! it's all working out as it should, and now we'll see what Rob Blake's plan is going to do for Wyoming!" he found himself shouting; although Sim was so greatly excited, he hardly knew himself what he said.

Ralph could be seen with the reel of wire in his possession. He was plainly unwinding it as he went, while Rob undertook to see that there were no kinks in the strands as they came off the barrel of the reel. Soon they were alongside Sim, who fell in step with the others.

The Fire Chief looked additionally anxious. He undoubtedly knew what tremendous issues

were involved in this last effort to save the town. Gallantly had he and his followers battled with the destroying foe, but so long as that furious breeze held out, all their efforts would have been in vain. He knew that unless some such desperate remedy as this explosion came to the relief of the outclassed fire department, the fate of Wyoming was sealed.

He devoted himself just now to seeing that there were no stragglers close enough to the doomed building to be injured when the dynamite was exploded. Several men belonging to one of the fire companies could be seen nearby, trying to turn the nozzle of the hose they wielded so that a stream of water would fall upon the old building; for it was recognized that unless the conflagration could be halted at this particular spot all work was useless.

Chief Megrue shouted to them, and when he had by this means caught their attention, he beckoned wildly. Although they might not quite understand what his motions meant, at least they were accustomed to obeying orders without questioning.

Dragging their hose after them with an effort, they commenced to head toward the spot where the Chief stood. This promised to take time, for their load was heavy; and seconds just then counted considerably more than a new supply of hose meant to the imperiled town.

"Drop it, and come here as fast as you can run!" bellowed Chief Megrue, using his hands in lieu of a megaphone; for it seemed that he had lost his trumpet while hard pushed to escape from a fiery trap when caught in a building that suddenly burst into flames, giving him scant time to dash out again to safety.

The men looked as though they could not understand what he meant. They evidently disliked abandoning a length of perfectly sound hose when there seemed no absolute necessity for it. Again did the Chief shout at them, continuing his wild beckoning at the same time.

"Hurry this way! Drop that hose, and come as fast as you can! We are going to dynamite that building, don't you understand, you fools?"

Perhaps that one word "dynamite" gave them their cue, for without any further hesitation the

three men dropped the hose, which commenced to writhe like a snake as the force of the water passing through the brass nozzle turned it this way and that. So they started to run toward the Chief.

Meanwhile Ralph, assisted by Rob, had continued to move steadily away. The wire would allow of their proceeding to a safe distance, when the battery could be quickly attached, and a connection made.

Sim had now been joined by both Tubby and Andy. All of them felt their hearts beating tumultuously, for no one could do more than guess at the result of the bold plan.

One thing sure, they had not left the old building a minute too soon. Why, it was on fire even then, for Sim could see flames creeping along the roof. He wondered whether there would be any break in the wire sufficient to prevent the full current of electricity from passing along it when Ralph came to making the contact. If such a thing did happen, it would be much too late to try and remedy the defect, because after that time it must be sheer madness for any one to

dream of entering the deserted factory again.

Surely Ralph and Rob must by now have gained a sufficient distance to be safe from any debris that might be thrown up into the air when the explosion came. Still, Ralph was the doctor in this instance, for he had had the experience in blasting out stumps and dislodging great rocks by the use of the dynamite.

Mr. Jeffords was there, too, watching his boy with eagerness. Then, besides, there were the trio of bedraggled firemen who had joined their chief at his command, all of them deeply interested in the success or failure of the scheme that meant so much for Wyoming.

The clamor all around them was just as boisterous as ever, for certainly nothing had occurred to tone it down. The citizens, facing complete destruction for their town, were hoarse with shouting; but their main thought now was to make sure of the safety of the women and children, who could be seen fleeing through most of the streets, awed by the terrible nature of the calamity.

Nevertheless, none of those who watched

Ralph and Rob paid the least attention to these outside occurrences. The fire might roar, and the populace shriek in terror, but just then their undivided attention was given to the little drama being unfolded before their eyes.

Ah! Ralph no longer pushed on. Whether he had reached the end of his wire coil, or believed that it was useless to cover more ground did not matter. What did count was the fact that he and Rob were feverishly attaching the battery and switch to the wires, showing that they intended to test their hastily arranged programme without further delay.

"Oh! hurry, hurry, please!" groaned Tubby, speaking to himself, of course, but in so doing voicing the feeling that held sway in every heart; for the building was rapidly being clutched in the ever extending fingers of the fire, and would soon be such a mass of flames that to wreck it might do more harm than good.

"It's all ready!" whooped Sim, as he saw by the actions of the two boys that they had succeeded in making the attachments.

Then Ralph pushed Rob forward. It could

be seen that he meant to force the scout leader to press the button that would complete the work. Even in that dreadful moment Ralph did not forget that it had been Rob's brilliant idea, after all, and to his chivalrous mind it seemed only right and proper that Rob's hand should be the one by means of which Wyoming might be saved.

Rob did not hesitate. This was no time for expostulation. He proceeded to do as the other urged him. Those who stood by held their breath with awe, watching the old deserted factory the while, as though everything depended on the result of Ralph's efforts.

They saw the building give a distinct shiver. Then the very earth under them actually rocked as if an earthquake had taken place. Tubby was thrown down, and the rest had more or less difficulty in keeping on their feet, such was the concussion of air as the dynamite went off.

They also heard a heavy roar, and then, wonder of wonders, the old building seemed to collapse, to fall down like a house made of cards. There was a horrible series of crashing sounds; some remnants even fell close by the boys, though

luckily none of them received the slightest injury. Then, as the smoke shifted and the dust clouds settled, they saw a great gap where the deserted factory had stood.

The Fire Chief was awake to the possibility of the debris presenting a new peril. He immediately gave orders to the three men to make their way forward, and if the hose were still in condition for use to turn the nozzle toward the wreck.

Then he hastened away to fetch up others, so that all efforts might be concentrated on that one section. The fight for the rest of the town must be made then and there. Already a heavy blow had been struck to beat back the fire; and if only it could be held to the other side, the valuable plants might yet be saved.

Soon men came rushing along. An engine turned a corner and stopped before a hydrant, with men jumping this way and that in the endeavor to get connections with the least possible waste of time.

The explosion must have terrified most people who heard it, since they could not but believe

it meant the destruction of some mill. It is wonderful, however, how news is flashed along from mouth to mouth during such scenes of excitement as this; and, doubtless, when people learned that the shock came from a desperate effort to confine the fire to the side of the town where it had started, their hopes would take a new bound upward.

"Will it force its way across in spite of everything, do you think, Rob?" asked Tubby, solicitously, as he stood beside the patrol leader, and watched the working fire-fighters battling so manfully.

"I hope not," he was told, in a reassuring tone. "You can see how they're trying to soak the wall of that nearest factory so it can hold out against the heat when the test comes. Besides that they are getting more water on right along. Here comes another company, and from the way the people keep cheering them I reckon they must belong in another town, and have been rushed here by special train."

It afterwards turned out that Rob had actually hit the truth when he made this guess. Word

of the dreadful imperiling catastrophe that had come upon Wyoming must have been flashed to neighboring towns by telegraph, as well as an appeal for assistance. Such a call is never allowed to pass unheeded in American communities, and just as soon as they could get the right of way a special train with the engine and fire-fighters aboard had been dispatched, with the order to "burn the rails" in making speed.

There was need of every available man and machine. The wall of fire had by now arrived at the gap, and gave positive signs of being disposed to leap across in order to complete its work of destruction. Men fought madly to restrain it. Those who held the various lines of hose pushed forward until their faces were scorched by the heat, but in spite of all this they persisted, and would not be denied.

"They're holding it there, mark you!" shrilled Ralph in the ear of Rob Blake, as all of them stood watching these exciting happenings, their hearts almost in their throats, so to speak, such was the weight of their anxiety.

Rob was encouraged. He began to believe

that after all the devoted firemen were going to come out victors in their fierce battle with the element that had started in to ravage the whole town of Wyoming.

He bent most of his attention on the buildings close by, for if one of them suddenly burst into flames it would mean that the worst that could happen was about to commence.

Vainly did the flames dart forth, fanned by that still raging wind, and endeavor to reach the buildings that had been cut off from their grasp by the destruction of the old factory. The more they tried, the greater the efforts of those who held the water nozzles continued. Wherever a certain point was threatened there would be a concentration of splashing fluid, and the enemy retreated, baffled again and again.

Rob noticed presently that each time the fire made this attempt to cross the divide it seemed to grow just a little weaker. He knew that the fuel by means of which it was maintained was being devoured at such a rate that, given time, the efforts of the Department would prove suc-

cessful. Even now matters had reached such a stage he believed the worst to be over; and that victory was in the air.

CHAPTER XXI

AFTER IT WAS ALL OVER

"I GUESS it's all over but the shouting!" exclaimed Sim, which remark proved that he too must have noticed some of the same signs detected by Rob.

"Oh! do you really believe that?" cried Tubby, a little look of relief appearing on his face, which lately had been screwed up in all sorts of lines denoting his strained feelings.

"Well," explained Sim, with alacrity, "you can see for yourself that so far none of the sparks have set fire to the roofs of the mills and factories, thanks to the men who are guarding the same, armed with buckets of water. If you watch carefully you'll learn that the blaze keeps on getting weaker right along. It's burning itself out, I tell you, Tubby. We win, and most of the glory goes to Rob here for thinking up such a grand scheme."

"Don't you believe that!" exclaimed the scout leader, energetically. "Nine-tenths of it ought to go to Ralph, you'd better say. Didn't he get the apparatus for blowing up that factory, and wasn't it Ralph who piloted the car back home and here again, going like mad? But perhaps you had better not say anything more about that business, boys; neither of us want to pose as heroes. After all, what we did was only the most natural thing in the world."

"Just what it was, and we're fishing for no bouquets, either, remember," said Ralph, who was close enough to hear all this talk.

It was now close on midnight, but no one in all Wyoming would dream of such a thing as going to bed. Some had been burned out of house and home, while all the remainder had suffered such a shock to their nerves that sleep was quite out of the question for them.

The danger was past, and every one could take a good long breath of relief. Why, even the wind had commenced to die down now, as though conscious of its defeat in trying to aid its com-

panion element in destroying the bustling town.

There would be plenty of work for all the firemen until dawn, pouring a continuous stream of water on the ruins of houses, and the lumberyard as well, that had been destroyed. Even when additional companies reached town, coming from more distant places, they were set to work rendering assistance to the stricken community; for those gallant fellows would have been sorely chagrined if compelled to return home without a chance to even wet their hose for neighborly accommodation.

The boys knew that presently they ought to pull out and head for the farm; but as long as Mr. Jeffords did not insist on going, it was not their business to say the word. They felt that they would willingly remain there for an hour and more, with so much going on to see and to hear.

It was Rob who began to exhibit signs of impatience, for, to tell the truth, the scout leader noticed that the crowd around them had been growing of late; and he also discovered that a number of the more prominent men of the town

seemed to be talking very earnestly with Mr. Jeffords.

Now, Rob began to take the alarm. He fancied that these people were talking about himself and comrades, because often he could see them look their way, and once a stout gentleman whom Ralph had told him was the mayor of Wyoming actually pointed in their direction.

"Don't you think we'd better be starting home, Ralph?" Rob went on to say.

The other chuckled as though he could give a guess as to what was bothering his friend. At the same time he shook his head in the negative.

"We've just got to wait till dad gives the word, you know," he explained. "Now he seems to be pretty busily engaged. Just hold **your** horses, Rob. The fire has been gotten fully under control, and there's nothing more to be feared from that source. Unless I miss my guess, the business men of this town have a duty, and a pleasant duty to perform. I don't mean to spoil it all by running away, not on your life."

Rob looked uneasy, but he was powerless to do anything.

"Oh! well, I suppose we'll have to stand for it, then," he muttered, as if making up his mind to take some punishment.

Ralph actually stared hard at him. Really, he had never before run across a boy just like Rob Blake. Most of the fellows he knew would have been only too delighted to find themselves in the limelight, and called a hero. Nevertheless, Ralph was determined that Rob should not escape by running away.

"They're coming this way," announced Tubby, who with Sim and Andy doubtless had already "sensed" what was in the air, for all of them were smiling broadly, and casting significant looks toward the plainly annoyed Rob.

Mr. Jeffords led the dozen citizens straight up to where the little group of boys stood, while a crowd pressed close around to hear what was said.

"This gentleman," began Mr. Jeffords, "is Mr. Perkins, our worthy mayor, and these others are business men of Wyoming, some of them owners of the costly mills and factories that have been saved from destruction through a brilliant and

bold scheme. I have explained to them that though the dynamite that saved the town belonged to me, and while it was my son Ralph who drove the car to the farm to secure it, still the conception of the grand idea was wholly Rob Blake's. They want to congratulate you, my boy, on your bright thought, and to thank you publicly for having been so instrumental in saving our town from utter destruction."

Rob opened his mouth to protest, but the stout mayor waved to him that he had a few words to say; so the boy shrugged his shoulders and held his breath. If they were so insistent, how was he to help himself? Nevertheless, he could not think it fair that more of the credit should be placed at his door than was given to resourceful Ralph, who, once given the hint, had engineered the whole thing.

"I want to thank you, Rob Blake," said the mayor, squeezing the boy's hand in his chubby palm, "in the name of all our people. Only for your quick wit and ready brain we might at this minute be witnessing the destruction of all our thriving industries, and Wyoming would have

been as thoroughly blotted out as some of those poor Belgian and French communities have been before the vandal guns of the warring Nations. And while I am about it I mean also to thank Ralph Jeffords because of the valuable aid he gave once you conceived the scheme of blowing up that building. Yes, let me also shake hands with these other three lads here who wear the khaki, for I feel sure that had you not been present, one of them would have discovered some way to accomplish the same purpose you had in view."

Even Tubby blushed at the compliment. Plainly, then, these good people of Wyoming were of an entirely different mind concerning those who wore the khaki. Not so very long since, according to Ralph, and they had settled in their minds that scouts were an undesirable organization in a community, just because the first attempt to raise a troop had been a failure, owing to the wrong sort of leadership, and the poor class of lads enlisted under the colors.

"It may be that you boys have heard about the failure that overtook a troop of scouts started in our town some time back," continued the

mayor, and at that Rob began to show much more interest than when he himself had been the object of attention. "But some of us are now of the opinion that we were wrong in condemning all wearers of the khaki because our own lads failed to equal our ambitions. I am sure I voice the sentiments of this entire community when I say that after having this lesson brought home to us we realize that we have made a great mistake. For one, I am in favor of urging that a troop of scouts be started here in Wyoming without delay, founded on the broad and noble principles of your order; and here and now I pledge you that my two boys shall become charter members. And I also hope very much that Ralph Jeffords will consent to take this enterprise in hand. All in favor of this say aye!"

There came a unanimous shout from the assembled crowd, who had been listening in absorbed attention while the mayor was talking.

After that other gentlemen came up, desirous of shaking hands with the boys who chanced to be visiting at the Jeffords' farm. Evidently the story of how the scouts had been instrumental

in tracking the lost child, and restoring little Caleb to his nearly distracted mother may have been brought to the town, for several of the men mentioned something about it as they warmly greeted Rob and Sim and Andy and Tubby.

With such a wonderful background as that still burning section of the town the picture was a striking one, which Tubby felt sure he would never, never forget. He was particularly pleased that they had cornered Rob, because on more than one former occasion Tubby had known the patrol leader to slip away after having been instrumental in accomplishing things worth while, just because he could not bear to hear people making him out to be more than an ordinary boy.

On his part, Rob was delighted to learn of the change that had come over the good people of Wyoming with regard to their opinion of scouts in general. They had seen a light, evidently, and would know from this time on that those who wear the honored khaki, if they are true scouts, are bound to be a credit to the community in which they dwell.

Ralph, too, looked pleased. To tell the truth,

ever since the coming of his cousin Sim, and his acquaintance with such a fine fellow as Rob Blake, Ralph had been wondering whether it would not be worth while to make another attempt to organize a troop in Wyoming, if sufficient encouragement could be received from leading citizens, and the men at Scout Headquarters were also willing.

Now it seemed that matters had been taken out of his hands by this strange happening, and the peril that had threatened the town. Instead of it being Ralph who spent his time in going around and beseeching citizens to allow their boys to join in with him so as to form a new organization, it was the mayor himself who gave the word, and even promised that his two sons should enroll their names among the very first candidates.

Plainly, then, Rob and his chums had been able to show what scouts are worth to any community and had made a deep and lasting impression on these people; it would not be long before their visit must begin to bear fruit to the honor of the whole organization.

Now that this ceremony had been carried through, perhaps Mr. Jeffords would be willing that they start for home. Rob was beginning to feel that a bed would not be unpleasant, for all of them had been up very early on the preceding day, and so much had taken place since then that they were tired.

Tubby, too, was commencing to yawn, which was a pretty good sign that he could not hold out much longer. All of them, in fact, were glad when Ralph's father came back and announced that they had better start out to find the car, which it was to be hoped had not been taken by any of the fleeing people.

This worried Tubby somewhat, for he wondered whether they would be able to hire a rig, or another car in case their own had been taken. All anxiety on this score, however, was soon set at rest, for as they drew near the spot where Ralph had abandoned the auto they discovered it still there near the curb.

They quickly found seats, Sim occupying one of the extra ones. So they started forth, and many times did Andy, Tubby and Sim crane their

necks to look back toward Wyoming; but the angry glow had faded from the heavens by now, and stars were beginning to show themselves here and there through the clouds.

“Well, after all, we’ve gone and forgotten Peleg!” announced Tubby, presently. “Too bad, and I hope he doesn’t have to tramp all of those ten miles out to the farm.” But Rob somehow found himself believing that Peleg had purposely kept away from them.

CHAPTER XXII

LAYING PLANS

"DID anybody happen to see Peleg after the fire broke out?" called Ralph, over his shoulder, as he continued to pilot the big car, the headlights showing him all inequalities in the road, so that he could avoid most of the "bumps."

"I did," spoke up Andy, immediately. "Let's see, I think it was just about the time that fat mayor was going around shaking hands with us, and giving us that taffy about his change of heart regarding the scouts."

"Then Peleg should have known we meant to clear out pretty soon," interrupted Tubby, slowly, "so if he had a particle of sense, and really wanted to come back home in the car with the crowd, why, seems to me he'd have hung around."

"Well, he didn't," added Andy. "I saw him grinning as though tickled half to death about

something. Perhaps now it pleased him to see that mayor grabbing our hands so,—well,—I might say effusively. How about that, Ralph; would Peleg care if he saw you being patted on the back, and made a hero of?"

"He might, and then again perhaps it was something else that made him seem so happy," replied Ralph.

The other boys may not have understood the real meaning of those words, but Rob did. He knew Ralph was hinting to him that the farm boy may have held back from joining them because he began to feel ashamed of what he had done, and could not bear to face the owner of the stolen stamps so soon after selling the packets to the curio dealer.

Even that failed wholly to convince Rob. When he believed in any one it was hard to make him change his opinion. Why should Peleg seem so well satisfied with himself? Surely, the getting of a few dollars, more or less, in a shady transaction too, of which he must later on feel ashamed, would hardly cause him to appear so happy.

Rob confessed that he could not make it out at all. He was really too tired to continue bothering his brains over the puzzle.

"Perhaps tomorrow, when Peleg comes home again, we may find out what it all means," he told himself. "There's no way of finding out right now; and so what's the use fussing with it?"

Accordingly, Rob put the affair out of his mind. If it came to the worst there was a speedy way of learning the truth, just as Ralph had mentioned; by going to town again, with the excuse that he wanted to see what Wyoming looked like after the great conflagration, Ralph could drop in and see the curio dealer. Being ready to buy back the stamps, if Peleg had really sold them, he could influence Mr. Hardman to return the stolen property.

They made the little journey back to the farm without incident. Ralph did not attempt anything like speed in covering the ten or more miles. Twice that same night he had raced like mad over that course, escaping disaster several times only by a narrow margin. Ralph did not care

to accept the same risks again when there was no sense in it.

Rob, however, would not soon forget both of those hurried trips, with that ominous glare in the heavens to spur the driver on.

Arriving home, they soon sought their beds, for it was a pretty tired lot of fellows who came back after such a tempestuous experience.

Little talking was indulged in, at Rob's suggestion. They could leave that for the morning, when they would be refreshed, and able to discuss all details connected with the night of terror.

When morning came it proved to be a fine opening, for the sun arose in a clear sky, despite the threat of rain during the earlier part of the preceding night.

They had hardly finished breakfast, and were trying to lay out a programme for the day, when the man Pete, who was in charge of Ralph's queer fur farm showed up. Rob understood from his manner that something unusual must have caused him to pay this early morning visit to the farmhouse, for as a rule he cooked his own

meals up at the other station, sleeping there as well.

When Ralph had had a little talk with him he came over to where the rest of the boys were sitting on the porch.

"Well, more trouble in prospect up at my fox farm," Ralph remarked.

"Another cat bobbed up, Ralph?" asked Rob, immediately. "I mention that because I happen to know as a rule where you run across one you'll also find its mate, for they generally hunt in couples."

Ralph nodded his head, and made a wry face.

"You're on, Rob," he replied. "Pete heard the critter screeching over in the woods last night. Then this morning he found where it had entered my preserves, and he thinks it must have got away with one of my fox pups, for he saw signs of blood and fur on the ground. But, anyhow, whether that's so or not, we've got to get after Mr. Cat, and keep it up till we bag him. There'll be no peace as long as he hangs out around my fur farm."

"Will Pete go out and try to shoot this one

like he did the last?" asked Tubby, remembering the fresh skin that had been fastened to a stretching board, and hung on the shady side of the cottage to dry in the air away from the sun.

"He'll keep on the move right along, with his gun on his shoulder," explained Ralph. "But his running across the first rascal was a big piece of luck. This time I'll have to try and fix a trap for the beast. Since there's no time like the present, I think I'll get busy now. Who wants to go up with me?"

There was a unanimous assent, showing that all of them felt a deep interest in this part of the proceedings. So, leaving the farmhouse, they strolled along in the direction of the fur farm, away off at the upper part of Mr. Jeffords' extensive property holdings.

Pete went with them, and on the way detailed once more, for the benefit of the scouts, how he had heard the screech of the cat not far from break of day. He had known that something far out of the common was taking place down at Wyoming, for he had seen the flame in the sky, and even caught something of the clamor that

accompanied the fire; but his duty was to stay and guard Ralph's valuable property, so Pete had resisted the temptation to start toward town.

In return, the boys described some of the wonderful sights that had come their way while watching the town burning. Pete was also informed concerning the fortunate inspiration that had come to Rob, following out which the dynamite had been used to baffle the fire fiend. Ralph it was who told most of this, apparently much to the confusion of Rob, who several times tried to throw the praise on the shoulders of the one who had piloted the car back and forth, laid the explosives without a hitch, and certainly merited a big share of the successful outcome.

Once they were at the cottage where Pete held forth, Ralph began to overhaul a number of rusty traps which he apparently had not touched for some time.

"Three winters ago," he told them, "I used to do quite a good deal of trapping, and learned a whole lot about the habits of such wild animals as we have around this section of the Adirondacks. Then I got that fur-farm fever, and read

up all the articles I could find about the raising of black foxes, and such things. Well, after that I didn't care to trap common stock, and so I haven't done a thing at it since. So my traps look pretty seedy; but they'll work, all right. Pete, the first chance you get, give these things a good oiling. No use having them go to the scrap heap for nothing."

He picked out a certain trap, and said it would answer their purpose.

"It must be set outside the boundaries of my enclosure," Ralph continued, when Tubby had suggested that one of the foxes or mink might be caught, "and I'm depending a whole lot on Pete to show me the right place. The cat will likely come back again tonight, and follow the same path to the high fence. We'll set the trap now, because even in the daytime a hungry cat often starts out to get a meal."

"Oh! I've met them in the woods when the sun was shining brightly," said Rob. "Hunger causes even animals who see best in the dark to roam around during daylight. But I agree with you, Ralph, when you figure that your trap is more

apt to wind up the cat's career than Pete's gun."

All of them went forth to see the trap set, Pete leading them to where he had reason to believe the animal had crossed the boundary line of the preserves. Tubby in particular watched every move Ralph made when setting the trap; for Tubby knew next to nothing about such things, never having had an opportunity to visit the woods during fur season.

After this had been duly attended to, they once more took a look around the fur farm, and then sauntered back to the house. Rob was wondering what Ralph intended doing with regard to finding an answer connected with the stamp disappearance mystery. He fully anticipated that the other would announce his intended departure for the town, and asking whether any of them would care to go along. But the morning passed away, and nothing was said or done.

In fact, Andy and Tubby went fishing, the stout scout seeming to have taken a great liking for the sport. Considering the fact that he was "high notch" so far, having captured the largest bass yet taken, this was not to be wondered at.

"I'm going to ask you to do me a favor, Rob," remarked Ralph as they sat there on the porch, Sim being at some other part of the premises just then, having accompanied his uncle to see a new patent churn that he had installed in the milk cellar.

"Now he's going to bring up the subject of Peleg again," thought Rob; but for once he was mistaken, since Ralph did nothing of the sort.

"I'm getting to be a whole lot interested in that flashlight picture game," he went on to say; "and I'd like to see how you work it, if you don't object."

"Why, that would be easy enough," the scout leader told him, much gratified, "for I happen to have the apparatus in my bag. You see, at the last minute I got an idea we might want to take a few pictures of that sort, and so I chucked it in. What kind of animal have you in mind, Ralph?"

"Well, my mink interest me more than anything else," came the reply; "partly because they are so shy that you can hardly ever get a glimpse of the little rascals. I don't know near as much

about their habits as I'd like, though as a trapper I understood where to set my traps in order to catch them visiting in and out of the holes along the banks of a creek."

"All right, then, if you say the word we can set a snare tonight that may bring results," Rob continued. "I don't know that I ever got a good picture of a mink, and it would please me to manage it that way."

Still nothing was said about Peleg, although Rob had incidentally asked some time before if the boy had shown up at the farm, to learn that nothing had as yet been seen of him.

Apparently Ralph had not as yet made up his mind concerning a visit to town. It might be that the strenuous events of the preceding night were still too vivid in his mind for him to desire to see how Wyoming looked after the fire. Rob, on his part, had no intention of influencing the other to take a run in, knowing as he did that this would mean a trip to the curio dealer, and possibly finding out certain unpleasant truths concerning Peleg.

The two fishermen came back in the car, which

Andy had been able to run, just as the lunch bell sounded. Rob knew as soon as he saw them that something out of the usual run must have happened, for both looked mysterious and excited.

CHAPTER XXIII

JUST BETWEEN BOYS

"WHY, they're all wet, boys, if you'll believe me!" exclaimed Sim, as soon as Tubby and Andy arrived in the car.

Tubby got out, laboriously, and then proceeded to exhibit as fine a string of bass as the heart of any enthusiastic angler could wish.

"But the biggest got away from us, I'm sorry to say," he remarked. "Course I know well enough that that's an *awful* old excuse, but in this case it's a fact. Our condition proves it, too. I held on like grim death, even after he upset the boat, and, say, he dragged me under twice, and then—shucks! the line broke. I guess he snagged it on a sharp rock. These bass are mighty smart fish, I'm finding out."

Andy was grinning, as though it may have been something of a "circus" to him even if he

had also been thrown into the water by the capsizing of their cranky boat when the clumsy Tubby became excited with such a large fish on his hook.

"Believe me, it was a lively time," he admitted. "Tubby was swimming, and spouting the water out of his mouth like a whale, all the while holding on to his rod, and trying to yell. I think he would have landed that monster bass if only the line hadn't gone back on him. He was the most disappointed fellow you ever saw when he found his prize had skipped out."

"Were you far from the shore, and what did you do?" asked Rob.

"It happened that we were fishing past that big rock where Tubby caught his other noble bass," explained Andy. "So we didn't have far to swim, pushing the boat between us. I knew that was the easiest way to manage, because Tubby would have had a tough job climbing over the stern."

"Huh! must have weighed nearly a ton with my soaked clothes," the fat boy agreed. "But we didn't lose anything, except a hook, and that

monster bass. It wasn't such a terrible experience, either. If the day had been chilly at all we'd have started a fire, and dried out; but neither of us cared to bother going to all that trouble; so we baled out the boat, and just commenced fishing again; but I never got another bully strike like that one."

They were not feeling uncomfortable in the least; as their clothes had by this time pretty well dried out upon their backs, neither of the boys took the trouble to make any change.

"I'm too hungry to wait a minute," announced Tubby, showing that he had heard the summons to lunch as the car approached the farmhouse.

It was high noon, and still no Peleg. Rob continued to wonder what could be keeping the farm boy in town. Still, it was a good ten mile tramp in case he thought to make it afoot. On the other hand, Rob thought he might be waiting for a chance to ride with some farmer returning home, and that the opportunity may not as yet have come along.

"What, no frogs' legs today?" remarked Tubby, when the meal had progressed far enough

to show this lack of his favorite delicacy.

"Oh! we've decided to leave all that to you, Tubby," laughed Ralph. "It seems that the rest of us have had all we want of that fish-chicken combination. There's the pond, and whenever you feel like having a mess take my Flobert and get busy. The rest of us have other fish to fry."

"What's the programme for this afternoon?" asked Sim.

Rob looked toward Ralph, fully expecting to hear the other suggest that they go to town. Again he was mistaken, for nothing of the kind came about.

"Why," Ralph started to say, "father has asked me to take the car and run over to Flemington to attend to some business that needs looking after. If any or all of you feel like going along, now's your chance to say the word. There'll be room for you, and it's worth going thirty miles uphill and down, for you'll get some mighty fine views. How about you, Rob?"

"I'm game if the rest are," came the ready reply.

In rapid succession Tubby, Sim and Andy an-

nounced themselves willing to take part in the excursion. It would show them a section of country that was new; and promised to be quite an enjoyable diversion. Evidently, then, Rob concluded, Ralph did not mean to look that curio dealer up in a hurry, so as to settle the question of Peleg's innocence or guilt.

"I wouldn't be much surprised," Rob told himself, "if Ralph sort of shrinks at doing that. He would like to get his stamps back, but while the case is open and unsettled he can try and convince himself that the boy isn't guilty. Once he has the proof dead to rights and Peleg must go. It does Ralph a whole lot of credit, this trying to give the boy all the chance he can."

They certainly had a glorious run of it on the way to Flemington, and the scenery was all that the enthusiastic Ralph had promised. He also managed to return by another roundabout road, so that they could see still another section of country.

"Ralph, slow up, won't you?" suddenly called out Sim, who was sitting on the back seat. "I want to get a better look at something through

the trees over here on the right. There, I saw him again, and now I'm dead sure of it."

"Why, it certainly does look mighty much like our Peleg," agreed Tubby, who had also managed to crane his fat neck so as to obtain a passing view; "but whatever would he be doing away over here, a long way from your place; and he seemed to be driving a horse and buggy, too. Ralph, what do you know about this?"

Ralph stopped the car, and also glanced back, for as he had to keep his eyes on the road most of the time, it was not easy for him to turn around, lest by so doing he land them in a ditch.

"Yes, that's Peleg," he announced, presently, and Rob could see that the altogether strange appearance of the farm boy over in this section when he should have turned up at the Jeffords' place surprised Ralph.

"What do you reckon he's doing over here?" continued Tubby, bound to "pump" the other until Ralph yielded up all the information at his disposal.

"Well, I can explain that part of it," was the reply. "You see, Peleg's sister is working out at

that house where he's going right now. Evidently Peleg has hired that rig in town for the purpose of paying his sister a visit."

"Oh! seeing that he was off work, he must have just made up his mind he might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb; is that it, Ralph?" demanded Tubby.

"Something like it, I guess," answered the other, at the same time giving Rob at his side a queer look, together with a frown.

Rob could easily guess what was passing through the mind of the boy at the wheel of the car; he believed that Peleg must be spending the money he had received for those packets of foreign stamps in paying for the horse and buggy with which he was driving over to see his sister.

It was not a pleasant thought to Rob. He wished the whole affair would make haste to reach a settlement; if Peleg were guilty, the sooner the fact became known to Ralph the better; if, on the other hand, he could prove his innocence, it was too bad to keep up this feeling of suspicion.

They started on again. So far as they knew,

Peleg had not once looked toward the road as he drove up along the lane leading to the farmhouse just beyond the brow of the rise. Apparently he was at the time so excited over the thought of seeing his sister again that he had eyes and ears for nothing else; and the mere passing of a car held no attraction for him. Rob thought it was just as well, for Peleg might have signalled to them; and in some way Ralph was likely to burst forth, perhaps openly accusing the boy in the presence of the others.

So they went on. Ralph kept his thoughts to himself, not even speaking of Peleg to Rob at his side. The others, very naturally, continued to exchange remarks that Ralph could not help hearing above the purr of the engine.

"Well, anyhow," Tubby was saying, with his accustomed zeal, "I'm glad to know he wasn't hurt any in the fire. When he failed to show up at the time we were leaving I felt worried. Lots of people got injured, I'm sure, for the crowd acted like it was crazy, running back and forth, and knocking everybody over who got in the way."

"Peleg is all right, we know now," interjected Andy. "He's wanted to see this sister of his for some time, I reckon, and took this chance to get around. Oh! look at that bull chasing after that dog in the field, will you? The little barker is too smart for the clumsy beast; but if ever he gets those horns underneath him, I give you my word for it he'll clear thirty feet in the air if he does one."

Little escaped their eyes as they rode along. First one and then another would call attention to something of interest that was seen, now on the right and again on the left. Tubby even declared that he was beginning to believe he had a regular "rubber-neck," they kept him looking so much.

Back at the farm again, they lounged around the balance of the afternoon. Ralph often looked along the road they had so recently driven over, and Rob made up his mind that the other was hoping to see Peleg coming. To his mind this proved that while Ralph had kept unusually quiet on the subject, he was still worrying about the status of the farm boy.

It was getting along toward sunset when finally Ralph, as if unable to longer hold in, introduced the subject himself.

Perhaps the fact that he and Rob chanced to be alone at the time had something to do with it. They were looking over the flashlight apparatus, which the owner had been explaining to Ralph, who agreed that the manipulation of the little "trick" was simplicity itself, and could be easily managed by any one with a fair degree of intelligence.

"It begins to look to me as though Peleg knows he must be under suspicion, and doesn't mean to come back to work here, much as I hate to believe that, Rob," was what he said, watching the face of his companion so as to read his opinion even before the other made any sort of reply.

"Oh! I wouldn't say that until you know more about his actions," Rob told him. "You yourself said he had a queer and powerful affection for his brothers and sisters. His going out there to-day proves that, too. Now as a scout I've been taught never to believe wrong of any one unless the proof is overwhelming; and even then to try

and think the best you can of him, perhaps by your influence causing him to repent and make restitution."

"I understand what you mean, Rob," muttered the other, "and if Peleg really showed any sign of being sorry for what he has done, I'd forgive him, and keep his secret. I'm not one of the hard kind to hold a thing against any chap, because I know we're not all alike. Peleg, being tempted, would mean ten times the strain on his honesty that the same thing would to me. Yes, I've already made up my mind to go easy with him."

Rob was glad to hear this. At the same time he still hoped there would be no occasion to exercise this clemency on the part of his friend. It was pleasant for him to know Ralph was that sort of boy; and he believed the other would make a model member of the new scout troop, when it was organized in Wyoming.

"There's just one more thing I want to say, Rob," the other remarked when they were about to pass out again to the open air, and join the rest of the fellows on the shady porch. "Meeting you has been a revelation to me, and given me

a lot of new ideas. And let me tell you I've never known any one who had such faith in finding a streak of good in every boy that lives!"

"Oh!" said Rob with a laugh, "that's easy enough when you figure out your own struggles between right and wrong. All boys pass through the same, more or less."

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE ANSWER TO THE PUZZLE

AFTER supper that night Ralph and Rob went off to set the flashlight trap in the mink enclosure. A fresh fish would be the bait to attract one of the timid little fur-bearing animals to the place; and the arrangement was such that when he attempted to possess himself of the tempting morsel, the pull upon a cord would cause the flashlight to snap off his picture before he could move.

Ralph was very much interested in the venture, and asked enough questions to give him all necessary information. Apparently he had taken a great fancy for this new method of "hunting with a camera," and would possibly amuse himself frequently later on in securing various pictures that could not otherwise be obtained.

When they got back, somewhere around nine o'clock, Tubby "wanted to know," as he usually did.

"How about that old bobcat, Ralph? Signs of him taking the bait you left out there for him?" he went on to inquire.

"We didn't bother going to see," he was told. "He's got the whole night before him to come around. So I'm just living off hope until Pete makes his report in the morning. I'd hate to have my plans all knocked silly by the accidental coming of a pair of cats."

"You've got to remember," Rob warned him, "to set your alarm clock so you can wake up at three o'clock. You must be on hand before the first streak of dawn, because if the light strikes in before you get there the flashlight picture will be ruined."

"Seems to me," observed Tubby, thoughtfully, "there ought to be some little mechanical invention calculated to close the opening of a camera after just so many seconds have elapsed."

"Perhaps there is," Rob went on to say, "but if so I haven't got the attachment on my camera. Better get up one yourself, Tubby; there would be money in it."

"I'll think it over," the stout boy told them.

"Sometimes I suspect that I might make something of a success as an inventor; but so far things I've tried to do just don't seem to work a little bit. I even experimented on a flying machine that was going to beat all these common aeroplanes, and leave them at the stake. But I own up that it wouldn't budge *me* off the ground."

"Which I should say was the most fortunate thing that ever happened to you, Tubby," chuckled Andy. "Falling overboard in the lake is bad enough, but then you can swim or float; but just think what would follow if that flying machine ever gave out while you were away up in the air. Some of the fellows used to call you Punkin once in a while, but believe me your name would be Squash then."

Once again it was morning, after another pleasant experience in which the boys managed to secure enough sleep to make up for the loss of the preceding night.

Rob, after getting out, wandered around to the barns to see the cows being milked, and the pigs fed, as well as the chickens and turkeys and ducks. He loved to watch the big bronze gob-

bler strut around, and make all those strange sounds as his wings scraped the ground. Then the lordly peacocks on the ridge-pole of the big barn emitted a series of shrill cries as they pruned their glorious plumage. When one of them chose to strut in all his glory on the ground, Rob thought it was a most astonishing sight.

"Did Peleg happen to come back last night?" he asked one of the men who was drawing the milk from a fine Jersey cow; Mr. Jeffords wanted richness rather than quantity, which was the reason he preferred that strain to the banded Holsteins.

"I guess not," came the answer—"leastways, I ain't seen anything ov him around since the boy rode into town with the lot ov you t'other evenin'."

All of which only added to the mystery. Still, another day had come, and perhaps they would see something of Peleg before nightfall. Since it was known that he had been within seven miles of the farm on the preceding day, while visiting his sister, there was a likelihood of his turning up. Rob was beginning to feel that he wanted to

see the end of this little mystery. Innocent or guilty, he certainly hoped Peleg would come along before the time set for their departure arrived.

Just then he sighted Ralph returning. He held the camera safely under his arm, and if the smile on his face stood for anything, Rob felt justified in believing that the little venture must have met with success.

"You got there before the light did, I hope?"

"Oh! yes, just the first peep was coming over in the east when I arrived and took up the camera. Your scheme worked, too, Rob, because the bait was gone, and the flashlight cartridge had been fired in the pan."

"We'll find out after breakfast whether the snapshot is any good," the scout leader suggested. "If this one proves to be poor, we can try again tonight, if no signs of rain warn us off. You never can tell what you get until you develop your film or plate. Some of the finest exposures I ever took were desperate chances, and that made the surprise all the more agreeable."

Later on Rob developed the plate in his daylight tank, and soon assured the anxious Ralph, who, strange to say, had up to then never cared for photography, that they had secured a splendid negative. It showed the cautious mink clearly in the act of taking the fish bait.

"I do believe it's my old Jinks, as I named the first mature mink I managed to get hold of!" exclaimed Ralph, minutely examining the bright negative. "Why, you can see the hair on his back, the detail work is so perfect. Rob, I'm going to like this thing more than I can tell you. It opens up a new field for me, and one that seems to be just to my taste."

"Best of all," added the patrol leader, "it doesn't make any inroads on the harmless little animals of the woods and swamps. You can get them at home, and learn more about their nocturnal habits than by any other known means."

After the negative had been dried later on in the day, Rob printed several copies, and passed them around. Even Mr. Jeffords declared they were very fine, and when he learned how his boy had begun to take a great interest in the modern

way of making the acquaintance of the timid woods folks, he encouraged Ralph in every way possible to enlist in the cause.

"Things like this always go to make boys more humane," the farmer remarked. "That counts a whole lot. As a rule, they are apt to have cruel instincts, handed down from their ancestors, who used to have to depend on killing game to keep themselves alive. It's about time something were done to soften some of those savage traits; and I believe your organization of scouts will do this without making boys soft, or sissies at the same time."

Plainly, the seed had fallen on good ground these days around Wyoming. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion that before a great while there would spring up an enthusiastic troop of scouts bound to be a credit to the community.

That whole day passed and still there was no sign of the absent one. Some of the fellows spoke of it as a strange thing, and also went so far as to hint to Ralph that it looked as though Peleg may have concluded he didn't care to work on the Jeffords' farm any longer.

Rob noticed that Ralph declined to be drawn into any discussion that had for its subject the doings of Peleg Pinder. He just shut his teeth together, and made no comment when Tubby and Andy started discussing this matter. At the same time Rob was quite positive Ralph had not forgotten; and he imagined that when another day came he might make up his mind to start toward Wyoming, bent on settling the bothersome question once and for all.

During the day no word had come from Pete, so it could be set down as pretty certain that the second wildcat had not been hovering around the preserves where Ralph was trying to raise fancy-priced fur.

"If anything had happened we would have heard," the owner of the fox farm told the rest of the boys. "Pete had orders to drop down and let me know. I'm just about fixing a little telephone service between my cabin up there and the home place here, so we can talk without all this running back and forth."

"Queer how you didn't think of that long ago," said Sim. "I'd have done it in the start."

"Well, the fact of the matter is," laughed Ralph, "I put every dollar I could scrape together or borrow from dad into my first blacks; and the fencing of that big tract cost a whopping sum besides. But now I begin to see an outlook ahead; and I've also convinced father that there's money in the project, so he's loaning me another bunch of money."

"When do you expect to realize something from the sale of skins?" asked Tubby.

"This winter," he was told. "I think I shall put over half a dozen black pelts by that time, some of which ought to fetch nearly top prices, because the animals are beauts. Then I've got a lot of skunks to get rid of, for they've increased rapidly. Needn't turn pale, Tubby, because I won't be raiding their den while you're within hundreds of miles of here, so you're safe. The mink and otter have yet to prove their value as producers of their species. If all turns out well there, in another year or so I'll be on the high-road to success, and a big one in the bargain."

All this was very interesting to the other boys. And from time to time that evening as they sat

around they asked additional questions connected with the unique enterprise that Ralph was engineering, surely one of the most remarkable that any wideawake American lad had ever engaged in.

Ralph and Rob had been up again to see that the trap for the wildcat was properly set. They also had a short chat with Pete, who did not seem to be at all discouraged because of the failure to secure a victim on the first trial.

"I'm banking on gettin' the critter tonight, though," he announced, and they knew that he must have some good reason for his belief.

Sure enough, in the morning, when they once more paid a visit to the fur farm, with Tubby, Sim and Andy tagging along, Pete took them out to where the trap had been set. He did not say anything, but Rob could see from the look on his face that he had a surprise in store for them.

The big cat had been caught, and Pete, coming along at peep of day, had killed it with a single shot, not wishing the wretched thing to suffer any more than was necessary. If anything, it was larger than its mate.

Ralph was feeling quite contented as they came back again to the house.

"Now there's only one more thing on my mind," he remarked to Rob, and the latter did not have to ask him what that was, for he knew.

He imagined that the invitation to visit Wyoming would be forthcoming around the lunch hour, for undoubtedly Ralph was growing tired of waiting for Peleg to show up, and meant to put the whole thing to a deciding test in the office of that curio dealer.

If such were Ralph's plans, they were fated never to be carried out. Rob was swinging idly on the porch seat, all by himself, the other three being back in the milk room watching the process of cheese-making under the supervision of Mr. Jeffords, when he saw Ralph come hastily toward him. Rob had reason to believe that the other must have been in his den at the barn, since he came from that direction.

When he saw the strange look on the other's face, Rob stopped swinging and awaited his arrival. No sooner had he come up than he tossed something in Rob's lap.

"I want somebody to kick me," said Ralph bitterly, "for I sure deserve it. Those packets are the missing stamps, and where do you think I found them but behind my trunk, where they must have been blown by a passing gust of wind!"

CHAPTER XXV

LUCKY PELEG

ALTHOUGH thrilled by the announcement, the scout leader's first sensation was rather one of great joy. He seemed to see the pale earnest face of poor Peleg Pinder rise up again before him; and how glad he felt that through it all, even when the clouds seemed darkest for Peleg, he had continued to firmly believe in the other's innocence.

Ralph was showing signs of remorse. He realized now that what Rob had said to him about not depending on circumstantial evidence, when charging a companion with an evil deed, was true, since at best it must be an unreliable staff upon which to lean.

Still, there was one delightful thing about it, besides the discovery of Peleg's innocence; and this was the frank way in which Ralph took him-

self to task. Such action spoke well for his bigness of heart. Rob felt sure that the young fur farmer would never again allow himself to believe wrong of a comrade without more tangible evidence than mere suspicion.

"So these are the stamps that kicked up such a tempest in a teapot, are they?" remarked Rob, shuffling the various packets between his hands. "The old curio dealer didn't see them, after all. That's going to save you a visit to town, I reckon, Ralph. The chances were you had figured on putting your threat into execution."

"Yes," replied the other, contritely, "I might as well own that I had made my mind up to run in this very day and learn the truth. I couldn't stand it any longer, you see, thinking all those mean things about Peleg. Right now I'm wondering how I'll ever look him straight in the eye again."

"Oh! don't let that worry you, Ralph. There's no need of his ever knowing that he was under suspicion. Where ignorance is bliss, you know, they say it's folly to be wise. Let things go as they were before."

Ralph shook his head dubiously.

"I'm inclined to believe there's going to be a change of some sort in our relations," he hastened to say, "because of this queer absence on the part of Peleg. He isn't the fellow to shirk work, and you know we saw him the other day over at the farmhouse where his sister works out. Then there was that talk about him receiving a mysterious letter; besides, we all noticed that he looked excited when we saw him in town; yes, and he even went into the Harris Arcade, where several lawyers have their offices, though I never knew they stayed there after nightfall. But perhaps Peleg had an appointment with one of them."

By this time he had Rob deeply interested.

"It begins to look as if there might be another mystery connected with Peleg's fortunes," he observed, laughingly. "This time we can wait for the developments without being worried. I suppose in good time you'll see the boy again, or at least have word from him?"

"That goes without saying," Ralph agreed. "I've always found him honest and straightfor-

ward. Something he didn't calculate on is holding him back; but he will show up in good time, believe me."

It was strange how much brighter the day seemed to Rob after discovering that Peleg was indeed innocent of peculation, and had done nothing that was wrong. Why, the very birds appeared to sing with sweeter notes than before, while the sunshine filled the boy with a joy he had not fully known since Ralph first communicated his doleful suspicions. That is always the way with a scout who has learned the greatest lesson on the books of the organization—to care for his fellows even as he does for himself, because that is the greatest of all commandments. Somehow nobody seemed very ambitious to be doing strenuous things on that particular day. It was pretty hot, for the mountains and the shade under the long porch appeared to strike them as just right. So they lolled there in easy-chairs, hammocks, and the broad swing as the minutes went past, chatting, telling stories of past experiences, and in this way exchanging views after the manner of boys in general.

Ralph wanted to know many things connected with the adventures which had fallen to the scout leader and some of his chums, not only around their home town down on Long Island, but under other skies—away across the water where the great nations of Europe were fighting the most terrible war of all history; upon the desert sands of northern Mexico; and even amidst the glories of the wonderful Panama-Pacific Exposition out in California.

This giving out of information was not wholly one-sided, either. Ralph had been around considerable, and was able to talk of strange things he had run across down in the Land of Dixie, where he had lived the better part of his young life, exploring the swamps where the weird Spanish moss festooned the trees, and gave such a funereal aspect to the picture; and Ralph could relate numerous amusing stories of the former slaves whom he had known.

So the morning passed away. The big bullfrogs over in the pond piped in chorus, undisturbed by any pot-hunter with deadly Flobert; doubtless, those bass still left in the pretty lake

back of the hills rejoiced to know they would not be tempted to take an attractive lure that was apt to have a sharp barb concealed within its midst. For the five boys spent the entire morning in sweet idleness, content to let the hours drift past without exerting themselves.

Tubby, Andy and Sim had heard enough to know that there was something queer connected with Peleg's actions. Ralph concluded to take them into his confidence with regard to the serious mistake he had come so near making. Consequently the packets of stamps were exhibited, and the sad story told of how a frivolous gust of wind had almost caused Ralph to accuse the farm boy of being a thief.

They promised never to breathe a word of the story. Secretly they thought all the more of Ralph for his genuine self-condemnation. No doubt, it would be a good lesson to all of them; which was really one reason why Ralph, at Rob's suggestion, had mentioned the facts; for they could see how easy it must always be to think evil of one's best friend when circumstances arise that seem convincing, although an explanation, if

sought, may brush them away as though they were mere cobwebs.

During that morning there must have been dozens of times when one or another of the boys walked to the end of the porch as if to stretch their legs, when in reality it was to look along the road in the direction that a traveler must take if coming from that farmhouse where they had seen Peleg driving up in what appeared to be a hired buggy.

"Here he comes!" suddenly called out Tubby all of a sudden, as he stood at that particular end of the porch.

No one demanded to know who was meant, because the same thought was in every fellow's brain. They scrambled to their feet from hammock, swing, and easychairs to twist their heads around, and stare in the quarter in which Tubby was looking.

Yes, a vehicle could be seen approaching, with the dust rising behind the lazy shuffling motion of the horse's hoofs. Apparently, whoever drove was in no particular hurry to get on.

"Why, there seem to be two persons in the buggy!" ejaculated keen-eyed Sim.

"But one's Peleg, all right," added Tubby, stubbornly, not wishing to be shorn of his right as first discoverer.

"Just who it is," Ralph assured them, and he ought to know. "The other person seems to be a girl, and it wouldn't surprise me now if she turned out to be Hetty Pinder."

"You mean Peleg's sister, the one who was working in service on that other farm?" asked Andy, more than a little excited as he seemed to scent something interesting in the coming back of Peleg under such odd conditions.

Mr. Jeffords came out on the porch. Possibly he had noticed the coming of Peleg up the lane that led from the main road; and felt a mild curiosity to know why he had remained away so long; also what possessed him to fetch his sister over from the farm where she had engaged to work.

Rob knew something good was going to come about. He gauged the broad grin on Peleg's face to mean that he had news for them. The

girl was smiling happily, it seemed. Yes, Fortune must have finally consented to beam upon the Pinder family, so long down and out.

"Good-morning, Mr. Jeffords! Good-morning, Ralph, and all the rest o' you," said Peleg as he came up the steps, holding his sister by the arm. "I just dropped over to let you know I ain't agoin' to work no more with you. Sorry to say it, too, sure I am, 'cause you've been mighty kind to me, and I never ain't meanin' to forget it, neither. I got a farm o' my own now, you see, Mr. Jeffords; and we're meanin' to have them other three Pinders come out o' the 'sylum and live to home."

"Well, this is great news, Peleg," said Mr. Jeffords, holding out both hands to the boy, and his shy sister, who looked so rosy and happy now. "Tell us all about it, won't you?"

"Just what I was meanin' to do, sir," said the accommodating Peleg, his eyes fairly dancing with excitement and joy. "You see, it came to me 'bout like one o' them bombshells I heard Rob here tellin' he'd seen explode over in Europe. That letter I got some days back was from Mr.

Green, the lawyer man down in Wyoming. It told me to come and see him that evening, 'cause he had some right good news to tell me. So I goes in, and he shows me a letter he had from another lawyer away out in Colorado. This says that my uncle, Peleg PIPPS, had just died there, and in his will he leaves what he'd scraped together to me as his—er, namesake the lawyer calls it."

Peleg looked proudly around as he said this, just as though he felt it a triumph, after all, to carry the name he did; though possibly on more than one occasion he had ardently wished it might have been plain Bill or Tom.

"This is splendid news you're telling us, Peleg," said Mr. Jeffords, still shaking hands with his former help. "What about the farm—is it one your uncle owned out there in Colorado?"

"Shucks! no, sir, it's the Widow Hawkins' place, you see, just twenty acres of fine ground that her husband made his pile out o' before he died. I used to work there once, and always liked the house, it seemed so much like a home.

Mr. Green, he fixed it so that half the money that comes to me is agoin' to pay cash for the Hawkins farm; and the widow, she's sent word we c'n get in right away. You see, she sold me the furniture and everythin' as it stands. And, oh! Mr. Jeffords, just to think I got a home now, after all, where we c'n all live as long as we want; and there ain't ever agoin' to be no poorhouse in our dreams, either."

Tubby, and perhaps some of the other boys as well, might have been observed to wink violently about that time, as though their vision had become more or less obscured. Rob was more rejoiced than he could have told, for it all seemed to be coming out like a fairy story, with this almost forgotten old uncle away out in Colorado dying just at a time when the little Pinders, scattered and homesick, were so much in need of succor.

They insisted on shaking hands with Peleg, each one in turn, and congratulating him most heartily on his great good fortune. Then they were also introduced to Hetty, his sister, a rather buxom girl of about fourteen, and large for her

age, who gave promise of being well able to act the part of homekeeper when once Peleg had gathered his little brood under the roof of the Hawkins' farmhouse.

CHAPTER XXVI

HEADED FOR HOME

PELEG and his sister were warmly invited to remain and take lunch with his former employer, which they consented to do. They meant to continue on afterwards to the Hawkins place, and start housekeeping immediately. Mr. Green had supplied the boy with sufficient funds for the time being, and promised to turn over the balance as soon as the estate of Uncle Peleg had been fully settled up, which would be in the course of a few weeks.

"What sort of a farm is this that Peleg has come into?" Rob asked Ralph, and the other three fellows bent their heads to hear, being deeply interested.

"It is one of the best around this whole section," explained Ralph, warmly. "Peleg shows great good sense in choosing to get hold of it at

a bargain, for the widow has been wanting to leave this country since she lost her husband, going to relatives out in Cleveland, Ohio. The house is roomy, and has some modern conveniences. The ground produces fair crops; there is considerable fruit, and a fine kitchen garden, always the pride of Mrs. Hawkins' heart. Besides, there are big barns, quite some stock, and poultry, as well as bees and such things. Oh! Peleg is the happiest boy in the whole State of New York just now, I can tell you."

"The best of it is," added Rob, soberly, "he deserves everything that has come to him. You told me how his one longing was to be able to earn a home, no matter how humble, where he could gather his brothers and sisters together under one roof. I never was so glad of anything in my whole life as to know that luck has at last smiled on the Pinders."

"Yes," remarked Tubby, wisely, "it's a long lane that has no turn. All you're got to do is to wait, and have patience, and dig away with might and main, leaving the rest."

"That's a long head of yours, Tubby," laughed

Ralph. "It's a pity fellows don't always practice what they preach. But I know how all of you feel about Peleg, and I want to say right here that it does you credit."

Indeed, Peleg looked very proud and contented as he and his sister sat there at the table with the rest, and answered the many questions that were asked concerning their plans for the future.

Later on they drove away again, after the horse had been "baited" at the barn; and all sorts of good wishes were wafted after them. Ralph looked at Rob and nodded his head.

"It all came out splendidly, didn't it?" he went on to say. "I'm mighty glad now I didn't give way to that feeling when I came near accusing the poor boy. He would never have gotten over it. I've always thought so much of Peleg, too. Now I can run over and see how they're getting along whenever I feel like it. From what I know of his ways, I'm certain he'll make that old Hawkins' farm pay well."

They were still sitting there on the porch about the middle of the afternoon, feeling that they might as well finish that day by doing next

to nothing, when a cloud of dust down the road caught their attention. Soon afterwards they made out several cars heading their way. To the surprise of the boys these turned in at the lane leading up to the Jeffords' farmhouse.

"Why, it is the mayor of Wyoming, as sure as you live!" exclaimed Tubby, beginning to look "flustered."

"And those other people are some of the leading citizens of the town," added Ralph, with a chuckle, as though he half suspected what it all meant. "Yes, I can see several gentlemen who are owners of those mills and factories. I wouldn't be much surprised now if they thought they hadn't thanked us enough for doing that little job, and have come out to repeat."

Rob jumped up, but Sim and Andy caught hold of him.

"No, you don't skip out of here," they told him in concert. "If there's going to be any sort of bouquet throwing, you've got to stay around and take your share of it. A scout never runs away from the firing line, you ought to know, Rob. So just grin and bear it."

Accordingly, Rob had to remain, though he looked uncomfortable.

There were fully a dozen gentlemen in the party accompanying the fat mayor of the town, and all of them seemed to be in a most agreeable humor, judging from the smiles that wreathed their faces.

Mr. Jeffords greeted each one in turn, shaking hands. No doubt, he was able to give a pretty good guess as to what had caused this exodus from Wyoming on such a warm afternoon; and it could be put down as certain that this was not intended to be merely a social call. Those men meant business as well as sentiment.

When they lined up, and the mayor turned toward Rob and the rest of the boys, it was plainly apparent that he had a little speech ready.

"I've got a few words to say to you, Ralph, Rob, and the rest," he commenced, "after which I have a very pleasant mission to carry out. We have been holding a meeting since the great fire that threatened to wipe out our town, and when all of Wyoming's influential citizens learned what a narrow escape our beloved homes and business

blocks had from destruction, they decided that they had not been able to express the feelings they experienced toward you boys who so nobly fought to hold the fire fiend in check. So we have come up here today, sent by the women of Wyoming, to tell you again how much they appreciate those efforts in our behalf.

“We know that it is against the rules of your organization, Mr. Scout Master, to accept payment for services freely rendered to others in times of trouble; but the grateful hearts of our women hope that each of you will not disdain to wear these modest little badges which they have had made by our town jeweler, and which are emblematic of the feeling they entertain for you.

“With your consent I shall take great pleasure in pinning these upon the lapels of your khaki coats where I see you already wear the honored insignia of your order. And I am instructed to say to you, one and all, that we citizens of Wyoming look upon each of these little medals as a true badge of courage, for it symbolizes the bravery and ready wit not only to conceive that grand scheme of blowing up a building to stay the

spread on the fire, but to actually carry it into execution. Rob, will you oblige me by stepping up, first of all, and letting me do you this honor."

So Rob had to obey, though painfully embarrassed, if his flushed face stood for anything. Ralph, too, was not forgotten, even though as yet he did not wear the khaki of the scout service; but events were moving rapidly now, and it would not be long before Wyoming would take her place in the ranks of those towns able to boast of a growing organization founded on the principle of "doing a good turn every day."

Afterwards, those boys had reason to feel very proud of the beautiful little gold medals that had been presented to them; and which they later on received permission to wear from Scout Headquarters, after the story of their labors in fighting the flames when Wyoming was threatened with destruction had been sent on by the interested people of that grateful community.

The rest of their stay up in the mountainous country of the Adirondacks was replete with lively happenings, but there is no time to relate their further adventures just now. They enjoyed

every minute of the time, and more than one noble string of fish was carried home from that teeming lake as a reward for merit and perseverance. Tubby, too, took toll from the pond where those monster "greenbacks" sang their nightly chorus. Before the boys finally left for home it was noticable what a difference there was in the volume of sound emanating from that pond on a still night.

At the time they said good-bye regretfully to Ralph, whom they had come to care for immensely, as though he were a brother to them all, the fur farm was progressing favorably. No more wildcats or other "vermin" had put in an appearance; and the proud proprietor announced on the last day of their stay that he had reason to believe his minks now had a family of their own, which would be a tremendous feather in his cap as a grower of fine furs.

They had had one opportunity to run over and visit Peleg in his new home, and everybody seemed delighted with what he showed them. There could not be any doubt about Peleg and his sister being as happy as the day was long;

and Rob felt sure they would make a fair success of farming, and keeping house, judging from what he saw while there.

The other little Pinders had not arrived as yet, because it would be a matter of some time before they could be formally released from the public institution to which they had been committed at the death of their father; but Peleg said he expected they would be home in about another week or so. How proudly he showed them the rooms fitted up for the youngsters, as well as the little chickens that were to be their especial pets.

So, in due time, Rob, Sim, Tubby and Andy once more turned their faces homeward. They felt that they had had a glorious vacation, as they sat in the train headed south; and every time any of them chanced to glance down at the "badge of courage" fastened to their coat lapels, doubtless their thoughts again carried them back to that fearful night when only for the inspiration that came to Rob Blake the whole town of Wyoming would have gone up in smoke and ashes.

THE END

